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# Plutarch's readers and the moralism of the *Lives*
## by

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## Abstract

This paper examines the moralism of the *Lives* by looking at how the response of the reader is constructed or implied in the text itself. Moral judgements on the behaviour of Plutarch's subjects, or injunctions to the reader to certain sorts of behaviour, are rarely made explicit, because the reader is assumed to share the narrator's value-system. This sense of shared values stems in part from a common culture: although the Lives are dedicated to a Roman, the ideal reader is constructed in the text as Greek. But the *Lives* do not simply reinforce this value-system; they also invite the reader to question it - that is, to engage in what Plutarch's age would have called 'philosophy'.

**Key-Words:** Plutarch, *Parallel Lives,* Ancient Biography, Greek Ethics, Greek Philosophy.

Plutarch's explicit claims for the moral purpose of his *Parallel Lives*, made in the prologues to several pairs, are well known. At the start of the *Alexander - Caesar* he declares that an understanding of the character of his subjects, conceived in terms of right or wrong behaviour, will be a determining factor in his choice of material: he will select for inclusion, he says, material in which there will be 'a revelation of virtue and vice' *{Alex.* I)[2]. In other prologues, Plutarch makes explicit the purpose of such a focus on the moral character of the subject: understanding the character of the subject will lead to an *improvement* in the reader's own. Thus at the start of the *Pericles - Fabius*, Plutarch talks of how reading about the great men of the past will encourage the reader to imitate their virtues *{Per.* 1-2). Similarly, in *Aemilius* 1, Plutarch describes his own experience as a writer as being like spending time with the heroes of the past and getting to know them; 'what', he asks, 'could be more effective for improvement of character?' *{Aem.* 1.4).

Plutarch's *Lives*, then, had a strong ethical dimension. In recent years the nature of this ethical content has come under a good deal of scrutiny. One fruitful approach has been to focus on the prologues of the *Lives* and on what

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2   For the ancient tendency to conceive character in moral terms, see GILL (1983); (1990); (1996). On the *Alex.- Caesar* prologue, DUFF (1999), 14-22.

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Plutarch says there of his purpose[3]. Another has been to catalogue and define the virtues and vices which Plutarch ascribes to the protagonists or others within his *Lives*[4]. A third approach has been what one might call philosophical: to look at the origins of the moral categories and attitudes which Plutarch assumes: are they Platonic? are they drawn from contemporary philosophical ideas[5]? Others have approached the moralism of the *Lives* in terms of contemporary politics and society: do the ideals assumed in the *Lives* reinforce or challenge the ideals of elite society in Plutarch's day? are they particularly Greek[6]? The purpose of this paper is to review current thinking on another aspect of Plutarch's moralism, the response expected of the readers. How is the relationship between narrator and readers constructed? What is their identity? What reactions on the part of the readers are envisaged, assumed or encouraged? 'Moralism' or 'moralising', finally, are terms often applied to the *Lives*, but are they helpful or accurate? I will look in some depth at the positions of Philip Stadter and Christopher Pelling, perhaps the most influential of modem critics to deal with these topics, and attempt to clarify my own position in relation to theirs.

### 1. *Shared values*

Christopher Pelling, in his 1995 article, 'The Moralism of Plutarch's *Lives*', focused more clearly than had been done until that time on the reader and his or her response. It is worth summarising his argument in some detail. The term moralism, Pelling argued, tends for modem readers to carry with it connotations of the author preaching to the audience, telling them directly things they either need to know or need to be reminded of. But this is far from the case with Plutarch's *Lives:* the ideal readers are not constructed as wayward souls in dire need of instruction, 'all agog for any Cleopatra which came along, all arrogantly proud of their lack of education or their class-bound inflexibility'[7] - people, in other words, who needed to be told that one must control one's passions, or that education was a good thing or excessive ambition a bad thing. Instead they are constructed as sharing the same values and assumptions as the narrator, and as receptive to the new twists or nuances which Plutarch might lend to their shared values and shared history. Indeed this sense of shared values, of narrator and reader being engaged in a shared endeavour, is one which Plutarch works hard to

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3   Discussion and bibliography in STADTER (1988); DUFF (1999), 13-51; (2004).

4   E.g. BUCHER-ISLER ( 1972); MARTIN (1960; 1961); FRAZIER (1988; 1996); CEREZO (1996).

5   E.g. CEREZO (1996), 19-27; DUFF (1999), 72-98. Cf., on specific *Lives*, DURAN LÓPEZ (1990); DE BLOIS and BONS (1992; 1995); HERSHBELL (1995); STADTER (1999).

6   E.g. PELLING ( 1989); SWAIN ( 1989), 62-66; ( 1990): partly summarised in id. ( 1996), 140-144; DUFF (1999), 301-309; cf. FRAZIER (1996), 97-168 and 275-281. PANAGOPOULOS (1977), though focusing on the *Moralia*, also has much to offer.

7   PELLING ( 1995), 207 [= repr. 2002a, 238].

create ᵍ. Pelling has demonstrated elsewhere[9] that this is one of the functions of the first person plural verbs we find in the prologues that precede many pairs of *Lives*[10] and of the first and second person verbs we find in the *synkriseis* which follow most pairs[11]. One could add to Pelling's list the occasional references, within the body of the *Lives* themselves, to what was still the case 'even now' or 'in our own day'[12], or the appeals for the reader's indulgence in telling or cutting short a digression[13]. All of these devices create the impression that reader and writer are linked by a bond of shared values[14].

If we press Pelling's argument a little, one result of this assumption of shared values between narrator and reader is that moralism need not be explicit, i.e. the text need not either comment directly on issues of right and wrong ('this was a bad thing to do'), or

be phrased in the second person or as an injunction ('we should all imitate this action'). On the contrary the mere narration of an event or a protagonist's action may, by the vocabulary chosen, the way it exploits well known categories, or the emphasis it receives, carry with it an implicit moral message: not one which is new to the readers but - on the contrary - one which is meaningful to them because they share with the narrator a set of assumptions about what makes good or bad conduct. To take two simple examples. First, when Cicero takes up the quaestorship of Sicily in 75BC, Plutarch declares 'when the Sicilians had experience of his carefulness, justice and calmness (τής ἐπιμελβιας και δικαιοσύνης και πραότητος αυτού), they honoured him more than they had ever honoured any other governor' (*Cic.* 6.1). The language chosen here - which invokes well-known and uncontroversial virtues - makes clear that the ideal reader

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8    Cf. STADTER (1988), esp. 292-293, on the bond of sympathy and shared values constructed in the formal prologues. Cf. also BECK (2000).

9    PELLING (2002b). Cf. also RUSSELL (1993) on the way Plutarch carefully constructs a version of his own character in his works.

10   *Demetr.* 1; *Per.* 2.3 (ἀγαπώπεν ... βουλόμ^θα); *Aem. \;Alex.* 1; *Nic.* 1. Cf. DUFF (1999), 35-36.

11   First person plurals: e.g. *Lys.-Sulla* 5.6; *Phil.-Flam.* 3-5; *Ages.-Pomp.* 1.1. Second person singular addresses to the reader: e.g. *Phil.-Flam.* 3.5 (σκόπ€ῖ); *Ag./Cleom.-Gracch.* 5.7 (συνορας* μέν οὖν καί αυτός*). See DUFF (1999), 203-204, 268-269, 286, 299; PELLING (2002b), 273-5 (= repr. 2004, 412-415).

12   6ΤL καί νυν, *en* παρ' ήμιν etc. E.g. *Thes.* 27.9; *Rom.* 14.3; *Marc.* 3.7; *Arist.* 19.8; 21.6; *Dem.* 19.2; *Flam.* 16.6; *Lys.* 12.2; *Sulla* 34.4.

13   E.g. *Lys.* 12.9. Other passages collected in DUFF (1999), 187 n. 108.

14   Contrast the rarity of such devices in Thucydides: only at 1.4 (ών άκοή ϊσμεν) and 8.41.2 (ών μ€μνήμ£θα), plus 5.26, which wavers between third and first persons (HORNBLOWER 1994, 163).

is expected to approve[15]. Secondly, when Alexander is pressing Eastwards on horseback in pursuit of Bessus, Plutarch describes how he refused water offered to him, as there was not enough for his parched men to drink. Plutarch concludes, 'When his cavalry saw his self-control and high-mindedness (την εγκράτειαν αύτοϋ και μεγαλοψυχίαν), they began shouting out for him to lead them forward with confidence and they whipped on their horses, declaring that they did not regard themselves as tired or thirsty or even as mortal as long as they had such a king.' {Alex. 42.6-10). Once again, it is plain not only from the terms with which Alexander's behaviour is described, but also because a general's sharing in the hardships of his men was itself a stock virtue[16], that the reader is expected to consider this a virtuous act. Furthermore, as in the *Cicero* passage, the reactions of a group of onlookers (the Sicilians, Alexander's cavalry), like a chorus in a play, provides a guide as to how the reader should react[17].

So     in both of these cases, it is clear both that and how the reader is expected to judge the actions of the protagonist. And to readers so minded, in both cases admiration for uncontroversial virtues, seen in

action rather than merely in theory, could provide a model for imitation in their own lives. Moralism, then, need not contain explicit second-person address ('do this', 'you should imitate that') in order to contain an implicit but nevertheless clear injunction understood by the reader.

This tendency in the *Lives* to avoid second-person injunctions might, of course, be put down to the demands of genre: history and biography, it might be argued, simply did not tend to address the reader directly in the second person. There is some truth in this. But in fact some historians do draw lessons for the reader explicitly. For example, Xenophon expounds on the lesson that can be learnt from the example of the Spartan Teleutias' ability to inspire his men {Hell. 5.1.4) or from his death in battle, when in anger he advances too close to the walls of an enemy city; 'from such disasters', comments Xenophon, T hold that men are taught the lesson, in particular, that they ought not to punish even a slave in anger' (5.3.7). So there was nothing unthinkable about historians giving their readers direct advice or passing explicit judgement, whether moral or practical[18]. Plutarch tends, however, to avoid this, relying rather on the bond of shared val-

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[15]  Cf. MARTIN (1995), 13-14. On the meaning of πραότης, see idem (1960).

[16]  See e.g. PELLING (1988), ad. *Ant.* 4.4-6 and 43.6. In the *Caesar*, the paired Life, Plutarch makes the point about Caesar sharing the hardships of his troops explicitly {Caes. 17).

[17]  For onlookers guiding audience reaction, see PELLING (1988), 40; DUFF (1999), index of themes, *s.v.* Onlookers, as mouthpiece for author.

[18]  It is more difficult to generalise about biography, giving the paucity of what survives. But *enkomion*, to which political biography owes in large part its origins, was full of - and predicated on - explicit enumeration and praise of virtues (e.g. Xenophon's *Agesilaos* or Isokrates' *Evagor as).*

ues, which link reader and narrator and ensure that the former understands, and is alert and sympathetic to the moral judgements implied, though not stated explicitly, by the latter[19].

Sometimes, however, it is not easy to see how the reader is expected to react. Here we return to Pelling's argument: the ethical content of the *Lives* is not always one that is, as he puts it, easily reducible to second-person instructions, whether explicit or implicit. To use his terminology, the moralism of the *Lives* is not always 'expository' or 'protreptic' but can rather be 'exploratory' or 'descriptive' - moralism which encourages the reader's reflection on the human condition rather than offering direct guidance on conduct[20]. In fact, Pelling argued, the kind of exploratory moralism that we get in *Lives* such as the *Demetrius - Antony* has parallels with what we find in tragedy. Tragedies do not preach at the audience or attempt to change the audience's moral outlook outright. On the contrary, tragedies can be so ethically powerful because audience and author work together, 'the

audience bring their own assumptions, and these assumptions are deepened by new insights'[21]. But is the distinction between 'expository' / 'protreptic' and 'exploratory' / 'descriptive' moralism really so watertight? As Pelling admits, although the distinction provides a useful model, it is, he argues - as models often are - too crude and represents in reality the two extreme ends of a continuous spectrum. Texts which explore and raise moral themes may well influence their readers' behaviour; sensitising them to the complexities of moral issues of which they were already aware may well influence their conduct[22].

## 2. *Roman readers?*

So far we have been talking of readers, and of virtues and vices, as though they existed in a historical and political vacuum. This is of course not true: readers' reactions, even to works about the past, will be affected by the norms of the societies in which they live; similar can be said about the way in which an author constructs his world. So who were these readers? In the past it was often assumed

[19] Though there are exceptions: e.g. *Ant.* 19.4: 'I do not think anything could be crueller or more savage than this exchange'.

[20] PELLING (1995), 206-208[= repr. 2002a, 237-239]; cf. idem (1988), 10-18, esp. 15-16.

[21] PELLING (1995), 219 [= repr. 2002a, 248]. Tragedies, he argued, like Plutarch's *Lives* 'can be ethically reflective and exploratory, without always producing conclusions which can be reduced to a simple expository imperative "do that", "avoid this"': PELLING (1995), 207 [= repr. 2002a, 239]. A detailed treatment of the links between Plutarch's *Lives* and tragedy as a genre (rather than of particular Lives or particular tragedies) has not been attempted since DE LACY (1952) and TAGLIASACCHI (1960), though a good starting point is now provided by PELLING (2002a) 111, n. 27. For more bibliography, DUFF (2004), nn. 5 and 45.

[22] PELLING (1995), 218-220 [= repr. 2002a, 247-249].

that Plutarch wrote for a mixed audience of Greeks and Romans, and that one of the purposes of the Parallel' *Lives* was a 'diplomatic' one of bringing the elites of the two cultures together[23]. More recently there has been a move to see the *Lives* within a primarily Greek context, writen in Greek for, it must be assumed, a primarily Greek audience[24]. I myself laid stress on the fact that such Greek readers were members of an elite whose opportunities for action were now severely limited by Roman power and for whom the examples of men like Pericles and Fabius Maximus, Demosthenes and Cicero, let alone Alexander and Caesar, were far removed from their own experiences[25].

But Philip Stadter has, in a series of articles, argued on the contrary that Plutarch's readers included both Greeks and Romans in high places, perhaps even the Emperor Trajan himself - men who were involved in high politics, at both city and imperial level, and who might see much of direct relevance in Plutarch's tales of politics and war[26]. On Stadter's interpretation, the readers of the *Lives* would benefit not only from abstracting in a generalised way the virtues and vices which they saw in the lives of the great men of the past, but also from seeing much in the circumstances of these men which was parallel to their own: they too might govern provinces or command armies. Indeed, the situations which Plutarch imagines, which so often deal with the need for the statesman to control the potentially destructive passions of the people, had relevance for the Emperor Trajan as well as for those involved in politics and administration at imperial and local levels[27].

That Plutarch's readers are imagined as wealthy men, members of a landowning elite, and used to the exercise of power at some level, is plain. But that they might be imagined as Roman, or as including Romans, is more contentious. Stadter's case rests partly on evidence for the identities of the members of the Plutarch's circle, the men mentioned in the *Moralia* or to whom either *Moralia* or *Lives* are dedicated, men like Sosius Senecio, dedicatee of the *Lives*, twice *consul ordinarius* and a legionary commander in Trajan's Dacian Wars[28]. This

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[23] References in DUFF (1999), 291 n. 13.

[24] Notably SWAIN (1996), 1-64, 135-186, though he is not explicit about the the identity of the *readers*; also WARDMAN (1974), 39-41. Cf. JONES (1971), 103-109.

[25] DUFF (1999), 66-68.

[26] STADTER (2000), 494-498; (2002d), 123-127. Also suggested by MOLES (1992), 294.

[27] STADTER (1997), 74-75; (2002b); (2002d), 127-132. This is the position STADTER takes in the *Sage and Emperor* volume (STADTER and VAN DER STOCKT 2002), and the position of most of the authors - see esp. his introduction (STADTER 2002a, esp. 4-8), as well as his paper (STADTER 2002c) and those of SCHETTINO (2002) and DESIDERI (2002). See my review (DUFF 2005).

[28] Dedications to Senecio: *Thes.* 1.1; *Dem.* 1.1; 31.7; *Dion* 1.1; *Aem.* 1.6; *Ag./Cleom.* 2.9; *Deprof, in virt.* 75a-b; *Quaest. conv.* 612c. It is just possible Senecio had Greek origins: JONES (1970), 103; (1971), 55; contrast HALFMANN (1979), 211; SWAIN (1996), 144-145

seems to me not entirely convincing. It is of course impossible to be sure who *actually* read the *Lives* (i.e. who the 'real' readers were): the most we can do is to look at what kind of readers are assumed or constructed in the text . And while the dedicatee of the *Lives* is, undoubtedly, a high-ranking Roman, other evidence suggests a Greek reader-ship[30]. Most notably, Plutarch often explains Roman customs and history in a way which suggests that the audience is imagined as Greek. Stadter points out that some apologies and explanations of Latin terms might be necessitated by the demands of style and genre - Latin terms could not be inserted without apology or explanation, and such apologies do not therefore imply ignorance on behalf of the reader[31]. But while such explana-tions of Latin institutions or words do not necessarily imply ignorance, they do create precisely the sense that in the Roman *Lives* reader and narrator are

Greeks looking outwards together at customs which are Roman and foreign[32].

Similar could be said about the way in which Plutarch assumes knowledge on behalf of his readers of Greek history and of the classics of Greek literature. Plutarch often avoids repeating material which had been dealt with in, for exam-ple, Herodotus or Thucydides, but shows no such qualms about Roman material found in Romans writers such as Livy[33]. This is particularly clear in the case of the *Themistocles* - *Camillus*: in the *The-mistocles,* Plutarch avoids going over the same ground as Herodotos, and so nar-rates very little of the story of the Persian Wars; in the *Camillus*, on the other hand, he is happy to follow Livy at length, even for events in which Camillus was not him-self involved. All of this suggests an ideal reader who is imagined as Greek, or at least as knowledgeable of Greek litera-ture. Furthermore the values which Plutarch assumes and the political mod-

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and 426-427. On Plutarch's circle: the most thorough study is PUECH (1992); other ref-erences in DUFF (1999), 288-289.

[29] Papyrus finds of Plutarch are comparatively rare; fragments of three Lives, dating to the second and third centuries, have so far come to light. But it is difficult to draw conclu-sions about Plutarch's readership from this evidence. For the details, see INDELLI (1995); LUNDON (2004).

[30] See PELLING (2002b), 270-271 (= repr. 2004, 407-409), who explicitly disagrees with STADTER's view.

[31] STADTER (2002d), 123-4. Cf. the similar argument of Alan and Averil CAMERON (1964) and Averil CAMERON (1966), 470-472; (1985), 113-119: Byzantine historiographers like Procopius who explain Christian practices cannot be assumed to be either pagan them-selves or writing for a pagan audience; the demands of the genre necessitated it.

[32] Similar might be said of the different ways in which Roman and Greek cultures are treat-ed in the *Greek Questions* and *Roman Questions*. See DUFF (1999), 298-301, with the provisos of 299 n. 34; PRESTON (2001).

[33] Explicit refusal to repeat: *Nik.* 1.1-5; *Dem.* 2.1; *Mul. virt.* 243d. Cf. DUFF (1999), 22-23.

els which he applies to history, both Roman and Greek - such as the distinction between the few and many, or the danger of demagogues and tyrants, or the importance of harmony amongst statesmen[34] - combined with the stress in several *Lives* on the importance of specifically Greek education even for Roman figures[35], also seem to presuppose a Greek audience.

Attempts to identify assumptions in the *Lives* which are particularly Roman or particularly Trajanic, or which show engagement with issues of concern to the imperial court, have so far proved disappointing[36]. While there may, for example, be some overlap in the virtues of the good leader highlighted in the *Lives* and those in e.g. Pliny's *Panegyric,* there is no compelling reason to think this indicates that the former were written for a Roman readership; rather, both are influenced by common currents and common generic roots, and the differences are as striking as the similarities[37]. Indeed Plutarch seems sometimes to work very hard to *avoid* themes which

might have suggested such parallels to Trajan's reign. This is clearest, as Pelling has argued, in the case of the *Caesar*. The Emperor Trajan was stressing his connections with Julius Caesar, and such connections might well have been in the minds of the readers of Plutarch's Life. But Plutarch deliberately shies away from mention of themes, or places, which might have encouraged them to look for contemporary allusions or links between the past and the imperial present. So while the *Lives* certainly had what Pelling calls a 'resonance' for contemporary readers, Plutarch seems at times to wilfully avoid straying on to ground which might suggest a too immediate present political relevance[38].

Dedication to a high-ranking Roman must, of course, mean *something*. On one level, we may see it as an act of pragmatic self-promotion, an attempt on Plutarch's part to establish or cement a relationship with a powerful figure. Viewed like this, the dedication to Senecio is an indication that Plutarch was emeshed in the web of patronage

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[34]  See WARDMAN (1974), 49-57; PELLING (1986); DUFF (1999), 301-309. Cf. JONES (1971), 111-119 on the political treatises as written for a Greek readership.

[35]  Greek education: PELLING (1989); SWAIN (1990).

[36]  See above n. 27. The attempt is not new: SCOTT (1929), 134-5, argued that criticism of the worship of Hellenistic kings was directed at the imperial cult; the *Pericles* and Trajan: STADTER (1989), xxxiv and note ad. *Per.* 39.2; MOLES (1992), 293-4.

[37]  For overlaps with the *Panegyricus*, see STADTER (2002C), which is suitably cautious in the claims it makes.

[38]  PELLING (2002C.) Cf. the *Phil.-Flam.*, which deals with Roman intervention into Greece. Here, argues PELLING (1995), 208-217 [= repr. 2002a, 239-247], Plutarch avoids raising themes which might suggest the present day reality of Roman power and the reactions and dilemmas of the Greek elites; on the contrary the themes which Plutarch chooses to highlight there are rather 'timeless' ones. Cf. also PELLING (2000), 58-59 on other *Lives*.

and informal ties which were so important for preferment at all levels in ancient societies. The dedication perhaps also functions to construct both author and implied reader as of high status: a way of flattering the audience, implying that they too, like the dedicatee, might move in high circles, hold high office, command armies etc., and that they too might therefore draw direct lessons from the *Lives* of the great figures of the past. But the dedication cannot be taken, in the face of evidence to the contrary, as an indication that Plutarch's readers were imagined as Roman. On the contrary, the *Lives* are distinctively Greek; in the Roman *Lives* they impose Greek moral and political categories onto Roman history and project Roman history through a distinctively Greek lens. Indeed, it is possible to interpret the paired structure of the *Lives*, one of their unique features, as an attempt to 'appropriate' Roman history for Greek readers[39].

### 3. *Problematic moralism*

Whatever we make of the question of the identity of Plutarch's readers, it is clear that the *Lives* have issues of moral-ity at their core, even if they do not preach. Stadter explored this notion further[40]. In two brief articles produced independently of Pelling's (Stadter 1997 and 2000), Stadter argued, as Pelling had done, that the *Lives* do not give ready-made lessons to the reader, to be merely learnt, and put into effect[41] . On the contrary by focusing not on single acts, which might more easily be judged good or bad, but on whole *Lives,* and by revealing the failures, dilemmas and moral shortcomings of the protagonists in all the messiness of political life, Plutarch presents not examples for imitation but 'case-studies' of moral choice and its consequences. The goal is not a final evaluation of his protagonists as good or bad. Rather, by studying the lives of such men in the round, 'as moral actors and not simply historical agents', the readers are challenged and stimulated to 'self-examination and self-improvement'[42]. According to Stadter, the image of the mirror, which Plutarch uses as a metaphor for what he expects of his reader in the prologue to the *Aemilius*, captures nicely how this kind of moralism works: a receptive reader will com-

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[39]  As I have argued in DUFF (1999), 287-309.

[40]  See also STADTER (2003/4), esp. 91-94, itself partly a response to DUFF (1999), and MARTIN (1995), which was published in the same year as PELLING'S article.

[41]  STADTER (2000), 493, cites PELLING 'S article once with approval.

[42]  E.g. STADTER (1997), 76, on the *Arist.-Cato Maj.\* 'The discussion of Aristides' poverty or affluence in the very first chapter establishes the major themes of both lives: can a simple life be combined with a political career? ... It is clear that in both lives, simplicity of life-style is admirable. But Plutarch's analysis of his subjects' behaviour points to differences in attitude and result. . . Which course is better, Plutarch encourages his readers to consider, and which is better for the state?' The quotations in the text are from Ibid. 80-81.

pare his own life with those of the men about whom he is reading, as though looking in a mirror, asking himself how he would react in similar circumstances, debating, perhaps, which course of action was and would be best[43].

This is an attractive argument. But in my 1999 book - itself conceived independently of Stadter's papers - I tried to show, and at much greater length, just how difficult it can be to extract lessons from some of Plutarch's *Lives:* just how complex, how challenging or 'problematic' Plutarch's moralism can be[44]. It is certainly impossible, I argued, to divide the *Lives* into positive and deterrent examples, paradigms for imitation or avoidance, as some have attempted to do[45]. Furthermore, although we can identify many of the assumptions underlying Plutarch's descriptions of human psychology, making moral judgements about the lives or activities of some of Plutarch's protagonists is often neither simple or easy[46].

Particularly problematic are the *Phocion - Cato, Lysander - Sulla* and *Coriolanus - Alcibiades.* These *Lives* seem to highlight ways in which different sorts of morality might conflict - private

morality and the public interest, for example. The *Phocion and Cato* provides two contrasting examples of how a statesman might react when faced with the inevitability of the imposition of autocracy on his state. Cato's philosophical commitment to principle at all costs is virtuous and admirable, but is also presented as extreme and over-rigid, and unsuitable to the realities of political life. Might not Phocion's willingness to compromise his private principles for the common good, we are invited to ponder, have been the better course? The *Lives of Lysander and Sulla* bring out how many temptations power can bring and how successful men can fall so easily into lust for power, greed, or brutality[47]. But while Lysander is less vicious than Sulla, he is also less successful: what happens when the demands of personal virtue conflict with the good of the state, or when a morally better man harms his country by his virtue or a worse man succeeds because of his very wickedness? Where does morality lie in war?

It is even more difficult to extract a moral lesson from the *Alcibiades - Coriolanus.* Coriolanus is a military

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[43] STADTER (2000), 500-505; (2003/4), 89-91. STADTER compares how in *On lack of anger* the speaker Fundanus describes how looking at the ill-effects of anger in others encouraged him to control his own (e.g. 455e-456b). For some more implications of the mirror image, see DUFF (1999), 32-34.

[44] DUFF (1999).

[45] On the basis of *Demetr.* 1.4-6. See DUFF (1999), 52-71.

[46] Human psychology: ibid. 72-98. Indeed, there may have been a trend as Plutarch's writing proceeded towards increasingly complex and morally challenging *Lives:* ibid. 62-63; cf. STADTER (2000), 509.

[47] See also STADTER (1992); (2003/4), 91-94; CANDAU MORÓN (2000).

hero, whose failings in political Life can be attributed to his poor education, which leads to an inability to control his passions. But Alcibiades, with his brilliance and outrageousness, is much harder to judge; indeed, the *Alcibiades* seems constantly to undercut and prevent a moralising reading of its subject, any attempt to place Alcibiades on a moral scale.

Nor is this difficulty solved by the *syncrisis*; in e. g. the *Lysander - Sulla* the assessment of the two men in the *syncrisis* is radically different from that implied in their two *Lives*. This 'closural dissonance', which is a notable feature of the *syncriseis* to several other pairs of *Lives*, has the effect of presenting the reader with two distinct views of the past, two distinct ways of evaluating the subjects of the two *Lives* which have preceded. The *syncriseis*, then, far from closing down moral debate, or guiding the reader, sometimes complicate a moral reading of the two protagonists[48].

The emphasis of my argument, then, was on how disturbing and challenging some *Lives* may be in their moral implications. To accept that some *Lives* are morally complex, or that some *syncriseis* undercut what has preceded, is not the same as saying that they challenge outright the existence of right and wrong, or that they lead the reader into a permanent state of moral *aporia*[49]

Rather in such complex *Lives* Plutarch shows that questions of right and wrong can be difficult to decide, that acting correctly may in practice involve difficult dilemmas, that two courses of action may both have something to be said for them, or that the greater good may sometimes seem to be achieved through immoral means. Such *Lives* may destabilise the assumptions of the reader, rather as some tragedies might[50]. They might make us question whether it is such an easy matter in the real-life mêlée of politics to tell what is the right decision, what is a 'moral' action; they might make us question whether a moral index is always the best one with which to judge people or events - but that is, in itself, a profoundly moral thought.

### 4.  *From moralism to philosophy*

Plutarch's texts assume, then, a reader who shares the same basic moral assumptions as the author, and who is receptive to a discourse concerned with right and wrong. While the *Lives* do often contain an implied 'message', i.e. something that could be (though is not) reduced to a second-person injunction, as in the examples from the *Cicero* and the *Alexander*, they do not always do so. In many instances moral issues are explored, through narration, but not 'solved': questions are posed, implicitly, bur answers not supplied. Sometimes

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48  *Phoc.-Cato Mine.* DUFF (1999), 131-160; *Lys.-Sulla,* 161-204; *Ale.-Core.* 205-240; 'Closural dissonance': 200-204; 243-286; Private morality and the public interest: see Index of themes, s.v. Expediency.

49  As it has been taken to be: STADTER (2002e), 175; (2003/4), 92.

50  Cf. PELLING (1995), 219 [= repr. 2002a, 250].

the effect is to throw new light on the reader's assumptions, to alert the reader to complexities and to give new insights; sometimes to challenge or complicate. This may deepen the reader's own understanding of himself and lead to self-criticism and reflection.

This is indeed what is implied in the prologue to the *Demetrius - Antony*, the only prologue where Plutarch explicitly addresses the question of unedifying examples. Here Plutarch highlights the need for discrimination on the part of the reader and takes issue with Plato's views that consideration of bad examples is always morally damaging. Discrimination *(krisis)*, Plutarch argues, is what marks out our rational capacity and is the hallmark of a rational response to stimuli of any kind. In the *Demetrius - Antony* prologue, then, Plutarch assumes a mature and discerning reader, able to grapple with the moral challenges provided by flawed individuals or complex moral dilemmas[51].

All this might make us wonder once again whether 'moralisin' is really a very helpful way to describe what

Plutarch is doing. 'Moralisin' is not, of course, an ancient word, nor does it translate a Greek term or map simply onto any ancient Greek concept[52]. Its connotations for us, as Pelling noted, are the hectoring tones of a preacher or a 'moralist, exhorting his audience to correct behaviour'[53]. Of course there were certainly sermonising texts of this nature in existence in the ancient world - the name 'diatribe' was sometimes applied to them[54] - but this is very far from what Plutarch is doing in the *Lives*.

In fact, the term which Greeks of Plutarch's day would most probably have used to describe what Plutarch was doing in the *Lives* and in which he was encouraging them to engage, would have been simply 'philosophy' [5]. It is true that Plutarch himself never uses the term philosophy when speaking of the *Lives,* but then he discusses the purpose or genre of the *Lives* rarely. But the description in *On the decline oforacles* 410b of Cleombrotus as 'collecting history to serve as material for philosophy' (ιστορίαν olov ὕλην φιλοσοφίας) is suggestive[56]. It is probable that Plu-

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[51]   DUFF (2004).

[52]   Cf. DUFF (1999), 13-14. The term ηθικολογία is first attested in Greek in 1871 and was coined in order to translate the French 'moralisation' (BABINIOTIS 1998, s.v.).

[53]   PELLING (1995), 206 [= repr. 2002a, 237-238].

[54]   E.g. the surviving texts of Bion or Teles. The exact meaning of the term and how far the diatribe was considered a separate literary form is debated. See MOLES (1996). Some of the works of the *Moralia* could be seen as drawing on this tradition: see TSEKOURAKIS (1983).

[55]   This is not a comment on genre: merely that 'philosophy' was how Plutarch's readers would have conceived the activity in which these texts were encouraging them to engage.

[56]   The passage reads: συνῆγεν ιστορίαν οίον ὕλην φιλοσοφίας θεολογίαν ὥσπερ αὐτός ἐκάλει τέλος ἐχούσης. On this passage, see FLACELIERE (1974); BRENK (1977), 90-91.

tarch and his readers would have seen the *Lives* in a similar way: works of political biography serving a philosophical end[57]. To talk of philosophy elides the artificial distinction between *Moralia* and *Lives*[58]. It also gives more appropriate connotations to what is going on in the *Lives* and the response expected of the readers - neither mere antiquarian or historical interest devoid of moral content, nor blind imitation of models or blind obedience to a set of instructions, but thought, consideration and introspection.

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[57] Cf. STADTER (2002a), 6: 'There is every reason to think that Plutarch saw his political essays and especially his *Parallel Lives* as his attempt as philosopher to enter the cave of politics' (alluding to Plato, *Rep.* 519c-521b), cf. idem (1997), 78, on the *Aristeides - Cato Major*: '... the emphasis from the beginning of the pair has been a philosophical problem, but one worked out in the real world'.

[58] The term *Moralia* can of course, because of its etymological connection with moralism, also be misleading. In fact, of course, it is a translation of the Greek Ηθικά, ie. these are works which concern character - but then so are the *Lives*. The term is not, of course, Plutarchan.

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