

Theoria, Praxis
and the Contemplative Life
after Plato and Aristotle

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THEORIA AND PRAXIS: ON PLUTARCH'S PLATONISM

Mauro Bonazzi

In the early Imperial age the philosophical schools were affected by a profound identity crisis to such an extent that redefining the sense of one's allegiances had become a priority.¹ The reasons for this crisis are many and not always easy to pinpoint. Undoubtedly, a key factor was the decline of Athens as a philosophical centre of learning: between the first century BC and the second century AD Athens suffered a brain drain of its great personalities, amid the rise of burgeoning new centres such as Rome, Alexandria and Rhodes. In itself, this fact is not important from a historical perspective alone. Decentralization from Athens implied also decadence for those institutions such as the Academy or the Lyceum that in Hellenistic times had been guardians of orthodoxy and presided over its enforcement in the schools. Besides, the surge in new centres brought about a variety of different ways of accounting for one's philosophical allegiances. Almost all schools were in this predicament but Platonism fared particularly badly, as it was seeking to reconcile a host of interpretations of Plato. On the one hand Platonism had to deal with the complexity of a legacy made up of incompatible images of Plato, ranging from the Sceptic Plato set forth by Arce-silaus and Carneades, to the systematizing Plato upheld by Antiochus or, before him, by some of Plato's own pupils like Speusippus and Xenocrates, or by their own students, such as Crantor or Polemo. On the other hand, though, the debate over this delicate issue could neither be sundered from the struggle for control pursued by rivalling schools: in one way or another, all schools (with the partial exception of the Epicurean) had made a bid for Plato's legacy, presenting him either as an heir (the Pythagoreans) or as a forerunner (the Stoics and to some extent the Aristotelians) of their own strand of philosophy. A stance had to be taken on this point, as well. The outcome was ongoing strife between them all and a huge output of (sadly now lost) treaties and essays focusing on mapping out the essence of Platonism—assuming there was one after all.

¹ Hadot (1987a); Donini (1994); Frede (1999).

Research in recent years has repeatedly stressed the importance of these debates, giving Plutarch his credit due for advocating, along with the anonymous *Theaetetus* commentator, the most challenging ideas. To our knowledge, Plutarch and the commentator are alone in arguing for a unitary interpretation that sought to hold together all the different stages of the centuries-old tradition deriving from Plato's teachings.² These are well-known matters, which I do not wish to dwell upon right now. Rather, I want to focus on another aspect of Plutarch's stance whose importance has not always been grasped fully. The originality of Plutarch lies not only in his vindication of the unitary thesis, but also in his passionate defence of his own idea of Platonism outside the boundaries of academic debate between schools, addressing a wider audience. Indeed, one could note that the identity crisis sweeping through so many schools in early Imperial times also comes across as a legitimacy crisis undergone by these same schools, and by philosophy as a whole. For sure, this problem is far from new, as even Plato, in the *Gorgias* and elsewhere, felt he had to justify his decision to spend his life in the pursuit of philosophy.³ But such an issue certainly gains great relevance in early Imperial times. Indeed, Plutarch stands out from the rest for the sensitivity he displays in this respect: as I shall seek to demonstrate, one of the key points of his interpretation of Platonism is his vindication of the importance and usefulness of philosophy. The analysis of the Plutarchean arguments will also serve the purpose of clarifying his stance on the *bios theoretikos*. On this issue Plutarch seems to stand out from other Platonists of his time, who had insisted on the ideal of *theoria*, drawing inspiration from some famous passages by Plato. With Plutarch things are somewhat different, and reservations are recorded in his writings on the notion of *theoria* as an end in itself. However, this is not to say that, on the opposite front, there is an outright tendency to vindicate active life. Rather, Plutarch is a supporter of the necessary union of *theoria* and *praxis*: therein lies the essence and superiority of Platonism, which reduces the issue of opposing genres of life to a spurious problem—at least from a Platonic perspective.

² Cf. e.g. Opsomer (1998); Bonazzi (2003) 179–240.

³ Cf. for instance Dodds (1959) 31.

I. *Against the bios scholastikos:*
Plutarch's Polemic against Stoics and Epicureans

I.1. When faced with the need to put across a complex argument, the best strategy is typically to establish a polemical target that is contrary to one's own position and against which the latter must be guarded. A fine polemicist (or great lover of controversy), Plutarch has readily and oftentimes deployed this strategy, and not least when it came to mapping out the ideal of philosophy and the model of Platonism to identify with. An eloquent testimony in this respect is certainly the opening part of the *De Stoicorum repugnantiis*. The treatise's underlying theme is notably the many contradictions of the Stoics.⁴ The worst inconsistency, which is denounced in the opening pages of the treatise, deals with the gap between theory and action, with particular reference to political commitment (1033A–1034C). In opposition to the Stoics, Plutarch lays out two different scenarios, both giving rise to contradictory results: on the one hand there are those Stoics (being the most influential), who have written extensively on political issues without ever putting their doctrines into practice, confining themselves to a life of learning (σχολαστικός βίος, 1033B–D: Plutarch mentions Zeno and Cleanthes, Chrysippus thrice, then Diogenes and Antipater); on the other hand there are those who have endeavored to carry out these teachings (1033E–F):⁵ but they too fall into contradiction, as Stoic doctrines in fact entail a dismissal of and contempt for political activity.

All in all, this controversy stands as a good example of the vehemence and bias in Plutarch's anti-Stoic criticism. To represent the Stoic view as dismissive of political commitment is at best a narrow portrayal thereof, if not downright wrong. Likewise, the same applies to the delicate issue of *bios scholastikos*: Plutarch clearly exploits a number of controversial statements by famous Stoics without worrying too much to grasp the underlying reasons.⁶ Rather than being a trustworthy account of Stoic doctrines, these pages—and especially the first part—help shed light on the model of philosophy (and therefore of Platonism) that Plutarch positively has in mind.

⁴ See Boys-Stones (1997) for an overall account.

⁵ Plutarch does not mention any name. Yet among the advocates of political commitment one could at least include Sphaerus of Borysthene and Blossius of Cumae, whose merits regarding the Spartan king Cleomenes III and Tiberius Gracchus are credited by Plutarch elsewhere (though not unambiguously; cf. *Vit. Cleomen.* 2.1 and 11.4; *Vit. Tib.* 8.6, 17.5–6, 20.5–7), cf. Babut (2004) 109–110 n. 10 and 114 n. 27.

⁶ For an attempt at reconstructing the Stoic position, cf. now Bénatouil (2007).

By way of this controversy Plutarch manages to highlight what he sees as the fundamental hallmarks of philosophy: and if some may be obvious, others are less so. Predictably, the first point Plutarch is adamant about is the serious nature of philosophy, which cannot be reduced to a mere game of verbal ingenuity (παιδιάν καὶ εὐρησιλογίαν), but rather requires utmost earnestness (ἄξιον σπουδῆς τῆς μεγίστης, 1033A–B). If this first point is downright trite, much less predictable is the yardstick used to assess the earnestness of philosophy: the focus is not so much (or not only) on doctrinal consistency, but (especially) on the ability to produce tangible results that are fulfilled in life. Philosophy is a νόμος αὐθαίρετος καὶ ἰδιός, a law freely chosen for one's own, writes Plutarch, where νόμος is clearly not just construed in the technical sense of law, expressing instead the set of values shaped by one's own conduct and life choices. The crux of the matter is that philosophy should yield practical and concrete results; it should set standards of behaviour that at the same time bear witness to its usefulness and superiority.

The consequences of adopting this criterion are even more interesting, as they seemingly imply that Plutarch has drifted away from an overriding feature in the Platonic tradition, namely the importance in its own right of a life devoted to contemplation and learning. To avoid needlessly exacerbating Plutarch's position, it should be noted that no reference is made here to *bios theoretikos* but, rather, to *bios scholastikos*, which is not fully identifiable with the former.⁷ Yet, despite this qualification, Plutarch's claims do not lack originality, as the Homeric reminiscence wielded against the Stoics shows: those who spent all their lives amid speeches, books and walks without ever truly committing themselves (the reference is to Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus) lead a life akin to Odysseus's men who, having *tasted* the lotus flowers, no longer strive for home, casting their duties aside (ἀλλ' ἐπὶ ξένης ὥσπερ τινὸς λωτοῦ γευσάμενοι σχολῆς τὸν πάντα βίον [...] διήγαγον ἐν λόγοις καὶ βιβλίοις καὶ περιπάτοις, 1033C).⁸ With this image Plutarch not only berates many Stoics for refusing to commit themselves, and thereby denouncing the inconsistency between their *logoi* and *praxeis*. The end goal of the jibe is inferred from the use of the verb γέυω and is confirmed soon after: in reality a life devoted to *scholē* is akin to a life devoted to pleasure, as if to say

⁷ Cf. Bénatouïl (2007). Nonetheless, Plutarch in some passages seems to associate *bios scholastikos* to *bios theoretikos*, cf. *Vit. Luc.* 1.6 and especially *Vit. Cic.* 3.3 (ἐπὶ τὸν σχολαστήν καὶ θεωρητικὸν [...] βίον).

⁸ Cf. *Od.* 9.93–97. By the way, this quotation further contributes to satirize Stoicism, which saw a model in Odysseus, cf. Bénatouïl (2009) 16. All Plutarch's translations are from the Loeb Classical Library.

that the Stoics do not live befittingly of their school's teachings, but according to those of Epicurus and Hieronymus (1033C).

The originality of the Plutarchean view stems from the comparison with his sources. As oftentimes before Plutarch also here deploys the dialectic strategy of Carneades, who shoots back at Stoics that same criticism leveled by them against their opponents: the polemical likening of *bios scholastikos* with a life of pleasure is in fact an argument drawn from Chrysippus, as Plutarch himself acknowledges upon quoting a long passage from the Stoic scholar's *Peri bion*. But since the Stoics themselves praise elsewhere the rational life devoted to learning, it follows that they are the true hedonists.⁹ To this point there seems to be scant evidence of originality, the dependence on Carneades' arguments being clear. Plutarch's polemic gains interest when it is found that reliance on Academic argumentation does not mean conforming to the Academy's positions. As Thomas Bénatouïl has shown, one of the polemical objectives of Chrysippus' equating *scholē* and *hedonē* was the Platonic-Academic tradition, accused of harboring a life dedicated to pleasure while trumpeting the virtues of the contemplative life. From a Platonic-Academic side these charges had sparked heated responses in defense of *theoria* and *bios scholastikos*, as specifically revealed by Cicero's account on Antiochus¹⁰ as well as by other accounts concerning the Hellenistic Academy of Carneades, Clitomachus, or Philo.¹¹ Yet we find no trace of all this in the *De Stoic. rep.*: to all intents and purposes Plutarch espouses the critical position of Chrysippus against the *bios scholastikos* simply by wielding it against the Stoics, and thus inherently rejecting the possibility that this ideal may be closely compatible with his philosophy, that is Platonism. In this passage *scholē* is actually construed pejoratively as a spell of idleness and laziness,¹² during which time—unburdened by commitment—one can turn to one's favorite activities and pastimes, thereby shirking one's responsibilities.

I.2. The logic behind the reference to Epicureans, virtually equating Stoicism with Epicureanism—Plutarch's real *bête noire*—is clarified when examined in the light of the final pages of the *Adversus Colotem*. In the *De Stoic. rep.*

⁹ Cf. Bénatouïl (2007) 16.

¹⁰ Cf. Bénatouïl (2009) 20–24.

¹¹ Cf. Bénatouïl (2007) 13–19.

¹² On the ambiguous meaning of *scholē*, cf. Bénatouïl (2007) 6. It has to be said, however, that Plutarch was not biased against *scholē* (cf. *De genio* 579A and below, n. 53): as has just been noted, he is opposed to *scholē* as a denial of responsibility.

Plutarch had criticized the life of learning (the *bios scholastikos*) envisaged by the Stoics as if it were a life dedicated to the selfish pursuit of one's own pleasure and peace (*hesychia*),¹³ thus assimilating Stoicism with Epicureanism. In *Adv. Col.* Plutarch draws the necessary conclusions of this assimilation: what was left unsaid in the polemic against the Stoics becomes outspoken in the one against Epicureans, thereby throwing light on what Plutarch believes to be the nature of Platonist superiority. Once again, the benchmark is *nomos* (and therefore the set of values and rules upon which a city is established), which in Greek tradition has always defined what separates man from beast.¹⁴ Plutarch constructs a three-way hierarchy around this concept, placing in the middle ordinary people who abide by the laws out of an external obligation, while on the two extremes sit Epicureans (and implicitly also the Stoics) on one side and Platonists on the other: Epicureans deny *nomos* any value, and as a result of this men slip back into a bestial world. It follows that the philosophy of the Epicureans (and Stoics too, given their identification) is not only a manifestation of selfishness and worthlessness, but is actually subversive and dangerous to the very existence of men: indeed, who are those individuals responsible for disrupting and destroying everything, other than those who withdraw from public life and from concrete commitments (1125C; 1127D–E)?

As for Platonists the situation is completely reversed: they stand on the far opposite side and are diametrically opposed to Epicureanism.¹⁵ As in the first chapter of *De Stoic. rep.* the Platonists' *nomos* is greater than the city's because it stems from free will rather than from an external obligation. On top of that, here it is deemed capable of salvaging the city even in the absence of laws, as it ensures justice is grounded in its divine and non-conventionalist value: while Epicureans drag men back to the wilderness, Platonists lead them closer to godliness, *assimilating* them to the divine world. This is a crucial point, which we shall come back to. For the time

¹³ Cf. *De exilio* 6.

¹⁴ Cf. paradigmatically Hes. *Op.* 274–280.

¹⁵ Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1124D–E: 'For if someone takes away the laws, but leaves us with the teaching of Parmenides, Socrates, Heraclitus and Plato, we shall be very far from devouring one another and living the life of wild beasts; for we shall fear all that is shameful and shall honour justice for its intrinsic worth, holding that in the gods we have good governors and in the daemons protector of our lives, accounting all 'the gold on earth and under it a poor exchange for virtue' (*Leg.* 728a4–5), and doing freely at the bidding of our reason, as Xenocrates says, what we now do perforce at the command of the law'. On Heraclitus, Parmenides and Socrates as part of Platonism see *Adv. Col.* 1121F–1122A with Bonazzi (forthcoming).

being, focusing on the closing pages of *Adv. Col.*, it is important to note that here too, in a manner not unlike that in *De Stoic. rep.*, doctrinal superiority translates into concrete results. Besides, theoretical objection falls short of what is required: as with the anti-Stoic polemic the pivotal proof of the failure of Stoicism was its inability to yield tangible results, and so in the *Adv. Col.* historical events stand to provide the best evidence of the superiority of Platonism:

And though Plato left us in his writings an admirable philosophy of laws and of the state, the philosophy that he implanted in his disciples was more admirable by far (Πλάτων δὲ καλοῦς μὲν ἐν γράμμασι λόγους περὶ νόμων καὶ πολιτείας ἀπέλιπε, πολὺ δὲ κρείττονας ἐνεποίησε τοῖς ἐταίροις), a philosophy that brought freedom to Sicily through Dion, and to Thrace through Python and Heraclides [...], while at Athens such generals as Chabrias and Phocion came up from the Academy. [...] Plato sent one disciple, Aristonymus, to the Arcadians to reform their constitution, another, Phormio, to the Eleans, and a third, Menedemus, to the Pyrrhaeans. Eudoxus drew up laws for the Cnidians, Aristotle for the Stagiritis; both were men from Plato's company. Alexander applied to Xenocrates for rules of royal government; and the emissary sent to Alexander by the Greeks of Asia, who more than any other kindled his ardour and spurred him to take up the war against the barbarians was Delius of Ephesus, a follower of Plato. (1126B–D)

This list is less random than it might seem at first glance, and serves the purpose of defending the Academy against the charge of being a school that fosters tyranny and rebellion—an accusation that went back to the restraining order against the activities of Academy and Lyceum alike, as proposed by Sophocles of Sounion in 307/306 BC and still extant in the pages of Athenaeus.¹⁶ In this passage Plutarch focuses on personalities linked to the first stage in the school's history, probably because the criticism leveled by its opponents focused on that same period. But the situation does not change even in the following centuries. An interesting case for gauging the originality of the Plutarchean position is that of Antiochus, whose vindication of *theoria* I mentioned earlier on: Plutarch notes that one of his most noteworthy merits is to have knowingly steered Cicero towards taking public office (*Vit. Cic.* 4.3–4).¹⁷ Similar considerations apply in the case of the skeptic Academy, as highlighted by the most eloquent testimony, namely, the opening section of the *Life of Philopoemen* that speaks of Ecdemus and

¹⁶ Cf. Athen. *Deipn.* 508f–509a with Bonazzi (2007).

¹⁷ Notably, it is hard to assess whether Plutarch accepted Antiochus as being fully compliant with Platonic tradition, cf. Donini (2003) 249 n. 14. But if he were, then it is thanks to his practical-political contribution rather than to his reflection on *theoria*.

Demophanes, two pupils of Arcesilaus. The words uttered by Plutarch in their praise capture and convey the very same points of the discussion in the *Adv. Col.*: they fought victoriously against tyranny, freeing their homeland and the city of Sicyon; they drew up legislation capable of bringing order and harmony in Cyrene, and above all they pledged to rear politicians like Philopoemen. To end this brief survey, suffice it to recall the two arguably most famous ‘Academics’, Dion in Greece and Brutus in Rome, who ‘both set out from one and the same training-school, as it were, to engage in the greatest struggles’, ‘and bore witness to the doctrine of their teacher of virtue’; ‘neither Romans nor Greeks should quarrel with the Academy’ (*Vit. Dion.* 1.4). These are the products of the Academy and this is the legacy a Platonist can go proud of: no matter how wise or well-argued, a philosophical discourse is worthless unless it is able to bring about fitting actions.¹⁸ In this sense, then, Platonism can claim its superiority over other schools: the preeminence of Platonist philosophy is proven through their deeds, and their deeds depend on their philosophy.

II. *Beyond the bios praktikos: The Political Theology of Platonism*

II.1. A quick analysis of these passages could lead to the view that Plutarch was a resolute supporter of the *bios praktikos*, understood in terms of active political commitment. This, however, would be a mistaken inference that could be easily offset by many other passages from the *corpus*, where Plutarch seems to favorably view contemplative life as the one most befitting the philosopher. Indeed, to recall the most significant evidence, when speaking in his *Life of Pericles* of the relationship between Pericles and Anaxagoras, it is stated that ‘the life of a speculative philosopher is not the same thing, I think, as that of the statesman. The one exercises his intellect without the aid of instruments and independent of external matters for noble ends; whereas the other must bring his superior excellence into

¹⁸ Cf. *Maxim. cum princ.* 776C: ‘The teaching of philosophy is not, if I may use the word of Pindar, “a sculptor to carve statues doomed to stand idly on their pedestals and no more” (*Nem.* 5.1–3); no, it strives to make everything that it touches active and efficient and alive, it inspires men with impulses which urge to actions with preferences for things that are honourable, with wisdom and greatness of mind joined to gentleness and conservatism (ἐνεργὰ βούλεται ποιεῖν ὧν ἂν ᾄψεται καὶ πρακτικά καὶ ἐμψυχα καὶ κινητικὰς ὁρμὰς ἐντίθησι καὶ κρίσεις ἀγωγούς ἐπὶ τὰ ὠφέλιμα καὶ προαιρέσεις φιλοκάλους καὶ φρόνημα καὶ μέγεθος μετὰ πραδότητος καὶ ἀσφαλείας)’, *Vit. Lyc.* 31.

close contact with the common needs of mankind' (16.3).¹⁹ How may these diverging accounts be reconciled? Should one acknowledge that Plutarch lacks a firm stance on such a key point, but wavers to and fro? Thus concluded Daniel Babut, for instance, acknowledging the persistence of 'divergent tendencies' in Plutarch.²⁰

But perhaps the situation is yet another and a more consistent portrayal of Plutarch may be rendered. To do this, however, we must place him in the right context, adopting a Platonic rather than Aristotelian perspective. The *De lib. ed.* 8A–B repeats the Aristotelian three-way partitioning of *bios* into *praktikos*, *theoretikos*, and *apolaustikos* to assess what type of life is best.²¹ Like Aristotle and the Peripatos, Plutarch promptly dismisses the *bios apolaustikos* that would liken us to beasts. Yet his solution strays off the path of Peripatetic debate. Plutarch does not claim to favor the contemplative life, nor the active life, and least of all an alternation between the two (the so-called 'mixed life'). Plutarch stresses the need for unity between *theoria* and *praxis*, in other words between *bios theoretikos* and *bios politikos* that turn out to be the same thing. Now, while the differences may seem minimal, this thesis is not perfectly compatible with the Aristotelian perspective, for the Aristotelian doctrine fundamentally presupposes that things and activities are divided along the lines of the theoretical life and the practical-political life with different areas of investigations,²² whereas Plutarch rather harbors the notion of a strong identification between the two, both in the content and in the activities: there is no true *theoria* without *praxis*, for it would amount to worthless knowledge, nor is there *praxis* without *theoria* as it would only lead to confusion.²³ And this is the Platonic rather than Aristotelian position: indeed, in Plato we find this overriding need to hold together the two perspectives, rejecting the notion that some

¹⁹ Cf. also *De virt. mor.* 440D, 444D with the commentary by Babut (1984) 73–74, and *Non posse suav.* 1096C and 1107C referred to by Bénatouil (2009) 14 n. 52.

²⁰ Babut (1984) 75.

²¹ *De lib. ed.* 8A: τριῶν γὰρ ὄντων βίων ὧν ὁ μὲν ἐστὶ πρακτικὸς ὁ δὲ θεωρητικὸς ὁ δ' ἀπολαυστικός, ὁ μὲν ἔκδοτος καὶ δοῦλος τῶν ἡδονῶν ζωῶδης καὶ μικροπρεπῆς ἐστίν, ὁ δὲ πρακτικὸς ἀμοιρήσας φιλοσοφίας ἄμυστος καὶ πλημμελής, ὁ δὲ θεωρητικὸς τοῦ πρακτικοῦ διαμαρτάνων ἀνωφελής. The Plutarchean fatherhood of this treatise has been disputed, cf. now Sirinelli (1987) 25–26. But ever since Wyttenbach numerous elements have been acknowledged as strongly recalling Plutarch. This passage is surely among them, especially the joint reference to Epaminondas and Dion.

²² Cf. e.g. *Met.* 1025b18–25; *Eth. Nic.* 1139a6–15.

²³ In fact, there appears to be in the passage an equation of philosophy with *bios theoretikos* and statesmanship with *bios praktikos*: this is because in Plutarch philosophy and statesmanship fail to overlap perfectly; cf. *infra* § III.

areas of investigation are specifically reserved for theoretical sciences while others are reserved to the practical sciences. The underlying assumption is rather the view that *theoria*, being an appropriate evaluation of things, is therefore the only possible premise for true *praxis*.²⁴ Of the many accounts the most eloquent one is that of the *Gorgias*, the dialogue which expressly focuses on the issue of different kinds of life as a central theme: the goal of the dialogue is to show that the juxtaposition between the two kinds of life set forth by Callicles in the wake of Euripides' *Antiope* is mistaken, because Socrates the philosopher is both things all at once.²⁵

And this is the position of Plutarch: the strong contraposition between theoretical activity and practical activity, each marked by its own field of investigation is a problem for those Platonists, like Antiochus or Alcinous, who strive to reconcile Aristotle and Plato.²⁶ But Plutarch sees things differently: no distinction exists between theoretical and practical knowledge; instead there is only one type of *theoria* uniquely capable of yielding truly good actions. As in Aristotle and Plato, the privileged object of the philosopher's musings is God: it is a typical belief of Plutarch that the highest form of philosophy is indeed the *theoria* of the divine, whereby philosophy is essentially theological.²⁷ But in a manner unlike Aristotle, yet akin to Plato, the reflection on God is not limited to contemplation or to *theoria* alone. Theology is the true foundation for the human world: *theoria* leads the way and is fulfilled through *praxis*. All the noble and virtuous deeds performed by the aforementioned Academy members ultimately do not rest on their own practical experience, but rather on this theologically-oriented knowledge. In other words, if we were to use a catchphrase, one might claim that Plutarch regards the true philosophy of Platonism as political theology. By basing his arguments on this belief, Plutarch is able to claim the superiority of Platonism over other schools: Platonism is a cut above the rest 1) for capably addressing the issue of God, being the question which everything else hinges on, and 2) because by successfully evaluating the divine it has been able to rouse and yield righteous and virtuous

²⁴ Strikingly, this idea finds a parallel in the Stoic views: cf. Bénatouïl (2009). This partly rests on the common Socratic backdrop, even though it yields different outcomes.

²⁵ Cf. Nightingale (1995) 60–92.

²⁶ An other noteworthy case is that of Plotinus, cf. the remarks by Annas (1999) 69–71 concerning his bid to reconcile theoretical and political virtues. Instead, one might seek out interesting parallels with Plutarch in either Cicero or Alcinous or Philo of Alexandria. For the latter, cf. Calabi (2008b) 155–184, for Cicero, cf. Lévy and Sedley, in this volume, 57–74 and 163–181.

²⁷ Cf. Bonazzi (2008).

deeds, the same ones that have dotted the history of the Academia. It is essential, then, to clarify this fundamental point.

II.2. To fully understand the meaning of 'political theology', we must explain the practical value of 'theology' and the precise meaning of 'political'. Regarding the first point we shall focus on one of the key doctrines of Imperial Platonism, namely the argument whereby, to attain self-fulfillment, the supreme end of men is to strive towards assimilation to God, ὁμοίωσις τῷ θεῷ. Together with other Imperial Platonists, Plutarch too believes that assimilation to God represents the end purpose of both human life and philosophical activity, as well as the true fulfillment of human beings. Patently, the necessary condition to achieve this outcome is a striving for knowledge, as stated in a famous passage of *De Iside*: 'especially we do pray that from those mighty gods we may, in our quest, gain a knowledge of themselves, so far as such thing is attainable by men'.²⁸

But knowledge is not just contemplation—indeed, it translates into imitation. When setting forth the essence of God, Plutarch insists on three hallmarks: God's incorruptibility, power, and virtue,²⁹ hastening to add that of the three virtues only the third is available to man. And given that the highest and noblest virtue is justice, it is by being righteous that men edge closer to the god: intelligence and reason thus serve the purpose of making men righteous (*Vit. Arist.* 6.3–4; cf. also *Vit. M. Cat.* 30.1), hence, helping them to rediscover the divine part within them: 'Consider first that God, as Plato says, offers himself to all as a pattern of every excellence, thus rendering human virtue, which is in some sort an assimilation to himself, accessible to all who can "follow God" [...], for man is fitted to derive from God no greater blessing than to become settled in virtue through copying and aspiring to the beauty and goodness that are his'.³⁰ And being righteous is not a mere state of mind, but always corresponds to an action. Just as God fulfills perfect virtue by engendering order, harmony and justice in the universe,³¹ so

²⁸ *De Iside* 351C–D: τῆς περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπιστήμης ὅσον ἐφικτόν ἐστιν ἀνθρώποις [...] ὡς οὐδὲν ἀνθρώπῳ λαβεῖν μείζον οὐδὲ χαρίσασθαι θεῷ σεμνότερον ἀληθείας. Cf. Ferrarì (1995) 18–20.

²⁹ This is then the truth mentioned in *De Iside* in the preceding note: yet it is always a partial truth nonetheless, cf. *De sera* 549E.

³⁰ *De sera* 550D–F: κατὰ Πλάτωνα πάντων καλῶν ὁ θεὸς ἑαυτὸν ἐν μέσῳ παράδειγμα θέμενος τὴν ἀνθρωπίνην ἀρετὴν, ἐξομοίωσιν οὖσαν ἀμωσγέπως πρὸς αὐτόν, ἐνδίδωσιν τοῖς ἔπεσθαι θεῷ δυναμένοις [...] οὐ γὰρ ὅ τι μείζον ἀνθρώπος ἀπολαύειν θεοῦ πέφυκεν ἢ τὸ μιμήσει καὶ διώξει τῶν ἐν ἐκείνῳ καλῶν καὶ ἀγαθῶν εἰς ἀρετὴν καθίστασθαι.

³¹ After all, 'without Justice not even Zeus can rule well' (*Ad princ. in.* 781B), cf. e.g. Pérez Jiménez (2005).

we can achieve our *telos* to the extent that, in our own time and in the limits of our possibilities (*kata to dynaton*), we shall successfully recreate order and harmony—in a word, justice—in the human world (*Vit. Phoc.* 2.9). ‘For God visits his wrath upon those who imitate his thunders, lightnings, and sunbeams, but with those who emulate his virtue and make themselves like unto his goodness and mercy he is well pleased and therefore causes them to prosper and gives them a share of his own equity, justice, truth, and gentleness’ (*Ad princ. ind.* 780E–F, cf. also 780E: εἰς ὁμοιότητα θεῶ δι’ ἀρετῆς; 781F–782A).

In Plutarch, *homoiosis* is never limited to the exercise of mere contemplation, but actually comes to a head through practical activity. The worthiness of this position, upholding the priority of reflection upon the divine and the practical value of *homoiosis*, warrants further commentary.³² In Imperial Platonism *homoiosis* has often been construed as taking flight from this world’s woes, to paraphrase the famous passage from *Theaetetus* 176b. But the Platonic texts that are usually relied on portray a far more complex situation, for even therein assimilation brings about imitation, in that it implies the need for crafting or transforming oneself and others. Assimilation, Plato writes in a decisive passage of the *Republic* (*Resp.* 500b8–e5), is the work of *mimesis*, an imitation that—*kata to dynaton*, inasmuch as possible—reproduces the harmony of the universe in the soul and in the city: if God is the maker of order and justice in the universe (*Tim.* 29a3), then the philosopher is the craftsman of order and justice in the human world (*Resp.* 500d6–8: *demiourgos dikaiosynes*). Also in Plato, then, assimilation is not resolved in contemplation, but is a prerequisite for action. Indeed, Plutarch proves to be well aware of these Platonic reverberations. For sure, even granting that other Platonists (i.e. Antiochus or Alcinous) too have appreciated the weight of the practical consequences of *theoria*, Plutarch undeniably stood out among them as the one who stressed the importance of this aspect as the feature that best defines the nature of Platonism.

II.3. What remains to be clarified is the meaning of ‘political’. In the light of what has been observed thus far, one might expect to find in Plutarch a strict application of the supremacy of the political dimension, tracing in

³² Particularly noteworthy on this point are the observations by Neschke Hentschke (1995) 207–216. Instead, Sedley (1999a) tends to view more favourably a settlement with Aristotle (and a reading of *homoiosis* in terms of contemplation).

his writings a vindication of the model, where the *archon* rules wisely and looks after his subjects as would the creator of the world—indeed, the thesis that we find in pseudo-Pythagorean contemporary treatises.³³ But this interpretation is misleading. To clarify this point two reasons may be put forward. Firstly, the theological motivations: being a keen reader of Plato, Plutarch is always aware of the gap between men and gods, and consequently opposes any attempt to deify the *archon*, a tendency distinctive of the pseudo-Pythagorean writings and of most pro-Imperial political treatises; moreover, as a further confirmation of the gap dividing the human beings and the gods, it must not be neglected that one of the basic assumptions underpinning Plutarch's theological thinking is the belief that we cannot fully understand divine truth: what accurately defines the philosopher is not that he holds the ultimate truth about the gods, but that he strives towards this kind of knowledge (which yields ever-increasing degrees of awareness, cf. the abovementioned passage from *De Iside*) and, especially, his caution (*eulabeia*). Without claiming to exhaust a topic as multifaceted as *eulabeia*, I do wish to stress here that given these limitations Plutarch clearly neither regards the philosopher as the wise ruler who is the faithful steward of God's truth, nor does he reduce philosophy to some kind of hierarchy. At most, this option could be likened to an ideal model rather than an actively feasible prospect.

The second and more important set of reasons concerns the way in which politics is understood.³⁴ If philosophy is political in the sense we have evaluated above, politics, real politics, is likewise philosophical:

But above all things we must remind them that statesmanship consists not only in holding office, being ambassador, vociferating in the assembly, and ranting round the speakers' platform proposing laws and making motions. Most people think all this is part of statesmanship, just as they think of course that those are philosophers who sit in a chair and converse and prepare their lectures over their books; but the continuous practice of statesmanship and philosophy, which is every day alike seen in arts and deeds, they fail to perceive (ἡ δὲ συνεχὴς ἐν ἔργοις καὶ πράξεσιν ὀρωμένη καθ' ἡμέραν ὁμαλῶς πολιτεία καὶ φιλοσοφία λέληθεν αὐτούς). [...] Now being a statesman is like being a philosopher (ὅμοιον δ' ἐστὶ τῷ φιλοσοφεῖν τὸ πολιτεύεσθαι). Socrates at any rate was a philosopher, although he did not set out benches or seat himself in an armchair or observe a fixed hour for conversing or promenading with his pupils, but jested with them, when it so happened, and drank with them, served in the army or lounged in the market-place with some of them,

³³ Cf. Centrone (2000) 567–575; see also Laurand, this volume, 127.

³⁴ Crucial on this point is the contribution by Trapp (2004) 191–199.

and finally was imprisoned and drank the poison. He was the first to show that life at all times and in all parts, in all experiences and activities, universally admits philosophy (πρώτος ἀποδείξας τὸν βίον ἅπαντι χρόνῳ καὶ μέρει καὶ πάθει καὶ πράγμασι ἀπλῶς ἅπασι φιλοσοφίαν δεχόμενον). So this is what we must understand concerning statesmanship also: that foolish men, even when they are generals [...] do not act as statesmen [...]; but that the man who is really public-spirited and who loves mankind and the state and is careful of the public welfare and truly statesmanlike, that man, although he never put a uniform, is always acting as a statesman by urging those on who have power, guiding those who need guidance, assisting those who are deliberating, etc.

(*An seni* 796C–D)

As Michael Trapp has rightly pointed out, this passage expressly draws a parallel between politics and philosophy.³⁵ Yet its undertones, conveyed by the more subtle approach typical of Plutarch, seek to emphasize an identity between philosophy and statesmanship, as confirmed by many other passages scattered across a range of different treatises. True statesmanship is not an intermittent string of services and needs, but a way of life, a *bios* (*An seni* 791C; *Praec.* 823C: τὴν πολιτείαν βίον καὶ πρᾶξιν οὐκ ἀσχολίαν), whose goal is not to exercise statecraft, but to achieve goodness and virtue for oneself and for others—more simply, to care for the souls (*Maxim. cum phil.* 776C: [...] φιλόσοφος ψυχῆς ἐπιμελήσεται; *Praec.* 799B: τρέπεσθαι χρὴ πρὸς κατανόησιν τοῦ ἥθους τῶν πολιτικῶν [...] ἡθοποιεῖν καὶ μεταρμόττειν τοῦ δήμου τὴν φύσιν; 800A–B: τὸ τῶν πολιτῶν ἥθος [...] πειρᾶσθαι ρυθμίζειν ἀτρέμα πρὸς τὸ βέλτιον ὑπάγοντα). The aim of Plutarch is not to turn statesmanship into something else, but rather to show that there is a kind of political activity—the only rightful one—that meets the criteria set by philosophy for attaining goodness and a good life. Consequently, a political life makes sense, and is the only one worth living, inasmuch as it coincides with philosophy. What Plutarch sets out to achieve is a ‘philosophization of politics, a collapsing of administration into ethics’,³⁶ that once again is supported and confirmed in Plato’s dialogues, and especially *Gorgias*, where Socrates proudly claims to be the only true statesman in Athens—not in the technical sense (which Socrates himself admits he has no expertise in), but in its psychological-pedagogical connotation—for being the only one to care about the souls and the real welfare of his fellow citizens (*Gorg.* 521d).³⁷ Once again, reading

³⁵ Trapp (2004) 193–194.

³⁶ Trapp (2004) 198.

³⁷ Cf. also *Ad princ. in.* 780D with reference to the Academy: ‘Polemo said that love was “the service of the gods for the care and preservation of the young”; one might more truly say that rulers serve god for the care and preservation of men, in order that of the glorious gifts which the gods give to men they may distribute some and safeguard others’.

between the lines of the dialogues and making comparisons at a distance with Plato help shed light on Plutarch's intentions. Still, a number of small but not irrelevant differences with Plato linger on: even these must be borne in mind when attempting to suitably piece together the Plutarchean position.

II.4. As I noted at the beginning, one of the hallmarks of Plutarch's stance is the awareness that philosophy cannot be restricted to the debates between schools, but must instead leave its ivory tower and open itself up to the city. Starting from this need, we can truly appreciate his understanding of Platonism. The primary objective of Plutarch is not just to reconstruct the doctrinal coordinates of the Platonic tradition in a consistent way, but also show that this heritage, bequeathed as Plato's legacy, represents the highest point ever reached by philosophy and by the Greek tradition as a whole. Clearly, this move is not without consequences, because the attempt to show Plato's relevance calls for adjusting to a setting (the age of the Empire) that is wholly different from fifth and fourth century Athens. Consequently, the portrayal of philosophy that is yielded does not always match that of the dialogues.

What has emerged so far is the belief in the 'political' nature of philosophy and the 'philosophical' nature of politics, in a way that substantially coincides with the dialogues. Moving from here, though, Plutarch carves out a role for the philosopher that, rather than being shaped upon the dialogues, seems to address more the society of his time. Whereas Plato appears to conceive only one true form of politics (i.e. philosophy), indeed appointing philosophers alone as rightful rulers, Plutarch instead establishes a distinction and a hierarchy, whereby practical, everyday statesmanship is allowed to stand alongside true political philosophy. It follows that, from being the only rightful ruler, the philosopher turns into the best adviser of the ruler,³⁸ while the likelihood of the philosopher's direct involvement in statecraft remains a mere theoretical possibility or is removed to a far-off dimension, such as the archaic world of Lycurgus or Numa.³⁹ Here and now, in the Imperial world, the Platonic theory of philosophers in office means that philosophers must act as advisers.⁴⁰

³⁸ Without specifying or excluding the Roman emperor: cf. e.g. Roskam (2002) 175–189: 179, who provides a balanced discussion on the relationship between philosopher and ruler from Plutarch's perspective.

³⁹ Cf. *Vit. Num.* 20.8–9.

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. *Vit. Cic.* 52.4 and *Vit. Dion.* 1.3: albeit more subtly, both passages deal with the

How should we evaluate this shift?⁴¹ Without a doubt there are differences from the dialogues, which strive to tone down certain instances of Plato's harshness and radicalism, thus defusing the force of his philosophy. No matter how significant they may be, these differences do not constitute disloyalty, however. More accurately, one should speak of a realistic adaptation of these ideas, which are capable of maintaining at least some of the most genuine instances of Platonic thought, albeit in a different context. In principle, upholding his own interpretation, Plutarch could have pointed out that even the *Republic* regards the genuine involvement of philosophers in office as a somewhat remote option, while Plato's own life, and his travels to Syracuse, bore witness to the possibility of real commitment in the guise of the philosopher-adviser. And given that Plato was actually the one who insisted on concrete results, this adaptation is not misplaced. In light of these considerations, it is no coincidence that the more effective passage, which best explains the strategic role of the philosopher—that brings together philosophy's reaching towards the divine, its political value and the ethical value of politics through the mediation of the philosopher-adviser—is contained in the *Life of Dion*, when speaking of Plato:

Dion therefore exhorted him [= Dionysius] to apply himself to study, and to use every entreaty with the first of philosophers [= Plato] to come to Sicily; and when he came, to become his disciple, in order that his character might be regulated by the principles of virtue, and that he might be conformed to that divinest and most beautiful model of all being, in obedience to whose direction the universe issues from disorder into order; in this way he would procure great happiness for himself, and great happiness for his people (ὅπως διακοσμηθῇς τὸ ἦθος εἰς ἀρετῆς λόγον, καὶ πρὸς τὸ θεϊότατον ἀφομοιωθῇς παρὰδειγμα τῶν ὄντων καὶ κάλλιστον, ᾧ τὸ πᾶν ἡγουμένῳ πειθόμενον ἐξ ἀκοσμίας κόσμος ἐστί, πολλὴν μὲν εὐδαιμονίαν ἑαυτῷ μηχανήσεται, πολλὴν δὲ τοῖς πολίταις).

(*Vit. Dion.* 10.1–3)

Plato, the philosopher par excellence, is the guide who helps men become virtuous (especially righteous), i.e. to strive towards deity insofar as possible, engendering in themselves that order and harmony which serve as the

union of *phronesis* and *dynamis* and not of ruling *philosophoi*, as in the passage from *Vit. Num.* quoted in the previous footnote.

⁴¹ It is important to note that this shift also helps clarify in what sense Plutarch sometimes characterizes philosophical life as 'theoretical' (cf. *supra*, *Vit. Per.* 16 and *De lib. ed.* 8A–B): clearly, once completed the severance (and it is no accident that this severance is implied in both passages), philosophy is entrusted more with *theoria*, and politics is more responsible for *praxis*. Still, this applies in a Platonic (not Aristotelian) perspective, in which *theoria* is no less practical, and *praxis* nonetheless flows from that *theoria*.

foundations of collective and individual happiness. In short, this is the lesson drawn from Platonism, which not only amounts to a set of doctrines but realizes itself as a way of life: a *bios philosophos* capable of combining *theoria* and *praxis*, overcoming the juxtaposition between *bios theoretikos* (or *scholastikos*) and *bios praktikos*; a *bios* that over the centuries has yielded many virtuous deeds, thereby confirming its superiority over other philosophies.

III. *Plato for the Empire? Philosophers, Advisers, and Daemons*

The relevance, consistency, and value of Plutarch's Platonism also stand out from a different perspective, if we look at its relationship with contemporary Imperial society. A constant trait in modern critical literature is to portray again and again the Plutarchean image of the philosopher-adviser to the ruler as a mere repetition of the dominant theme in the political output of the time.⁴² Consequently, one tends to emphasize the lack of originality in Plutarch, claiming on the one hand that his writings taught more about living with (Roman) authority than about changing (or saving, to borrow a Platonic expression) the world.⁴³ This is partly true, though misleading, unless the differences with the overriding model are also weighed up. The image of the philosopher/statesman/adviser in Plutarch is not functional to the will to carve a role for the intellectual, when set against a backdrop that leaves no margin for concrete action. Plutarch rather seems bent on overturning the hierarchy, by upholding the unique role of the philosopher.⁴⁴ I mentioned earlier the case of Anaxagoras, whom Babut had acknowledged as an example of theoretical life, in contrast with the statesman Pericles. In fact, contrary to Babut's claims, this passage reveals no opposition between

⁴² Cf. e.g. L. de Blois (1999) 303–304.

⁴³ A second range of issues arise from his alleged 'Machiavellianism' that is partly real, even though its reach should not be overestimated, as very wisely noted by Trapp (2004) 196–197: the ethical-pedagogical approach advocated by Plutarch, whereby e.g. true charity (*euergesia*) lies not in donating money but in looking after the real welfare of one's subjects (*Praec.* 822D–823B), actually carries a strong critical message of the dominant *mores* and applied customs of the time, the sense of which might be elusive to us, though probably not to his contemporaries.

⁴⁴ A partial exception might be the famous passage on Alexander (*De fort. Alex.* 328D–E): therein, however, the great statesman is not matched up with authentic philosophy, but with a restrictive and bookish notion thereof; the same also applies to the jibes against Cato and the *Resp.* in *Vit. Phoc.* 3.2, as well as to the alleged superiority of Lycurgus over philosophers (including Plato) in *Vit. Lyc.* 31.2.

the philosopher and the statesman, but rather collaboration; a collaboration in which the poor and seemingly worthless philosopher (for Pericles with all his wealth was the one who helped others, including Anaxagoras) is then appointed to the highest rank. When Anaxagoras was starving himself to death, Pericles 'was struck with dismay, and ran at once to the poor man, and besought him most fervently to live, bewailing not so much that great teacher's lot as his own, were he now to be bereft of such a counselor in the conduct of the state' (πολιτείας σύμβουλον, *Vit. Per.* 16). Even this short passage hints at the true philosopher's leading role, therefore emphasizing the practical worth and importance of his theoretical musings.⁴⁵

But that is not all. The real difference is metaphysical: the philosopher's superiority hinges on his crucial role as mediator between the divine and the human world. On account of his constant striving towards the divine, the philosopher is a daemonic man who oversees the lives of men, and in this sense his role is even more important than that of the ruler. This view of the philosopher's 'daemonic' nature is less fanciful than one might believe at first, for it is grounded on a specific anthropology that is set forth several times, especially in the myths (the genre of preference for addressing divine matters). Plutarch believes man to be made up of mind (*nous*), soul (*psyche*) and body (*soma*), whereof reason is the most divine part and overriding in the philosopher: this bears out the philosopher's special relationship with the divinity and, consequently, his superiority.⁴⁶ But this is not the place to address an issue as controversial as the *daimones* in Plutarchean thinking. I simply wish to point out here how the daemonic nature that Plutarch lays upon the true philosopher (and therefore upon the true statesman) serves the purpose of clarifying one of the issues that has engaged scholars most in recent years. I am speaking of the character and role of Epaminondas in the *De genio Socratis*, one of the most successful writings by Plutarch, yet one of his most unfathomable too. Critics have long found Epaminondas to be the central figure of the book, and the one who best embodies the philosophical ideal set out by Plutarch, namely, full reconciliation between contemplative

⁴⁵ The issue gains greater interest if one considers that beyond the philosopher-ruler relationship there also is that between Greece and Rome, cf. Whitmarsh (2001) 186: 'the ideal ruler is metaphorically ruled by philosophy, a message that implies an intercultural drama of power and authority'.

⁴⁶ Cf. especially the myth told by Timarchus in *De genio* 591Dff. with the commentary by Babut (1984) 69–70. The *nous* is linked to the theoretical virtue mentioned in the *De virt. mor.*, without implying that this results in the exaltation of the *bios theoretikos* claimed by Babut.

life and active life (and this is also the underlying theme of the dialogue).⁴⁷ So why then does Epaminondas, the Theban Socrates and συνουσιαστής of Plato (*De lib. ed.* 7B), refrain from decisively taking part in the military campaign that heaped glory upon Thebes and Boeotia (the birthplace of Plutarch), and that Plutarch clearly viewed most favorably? The non-commitment and silence of Epaminondas have greatly bewildered scholars.⁴⁸ But if my reading is correct, his refusal to join in the political-military conspiracy fails to raise any insurmountable problems. Despite his devotion to learning, Epaminondas is not just a contemplative philosopher, inexorably set apart from his countrymen's political interests: Plutarch repeatedly underlines his caring for his fellow citizens.⁴⁹ Crucially, the terms of his commitment differ from those of his Theban friends, by the same token that the philosopher of the *Republic* is unlike the *phylakes*.⁵⁰ Epaminondas is a philosopher in the aforementioned sense of a daemonic adviser: it is in this perspective that his character's clear-cut active commitment and thirst for learning are reconciled so well. Epaminondas is not a politician engaged in power struggles, nor is he concerned with backing either party in the process. His mission is to foster divine values such as justice, concord and harmony. This explains his refusal to engage in an all-out military campaign:

Epaminondas has been unsuccessful in his endeavor to persuade us to drop them, as he believes would be for us the best. It is hardly surprising, then, that he refuses our invitation to proceedings that run counter to his nature and his judgment [...] [he] will gladly join with all who endeavor without resorting to civil bloodshed and slaughter to set our city free. But since the majority are against him, and we already engaged in this course, he would have us allow him to await the favorable moment for intervention, remaining innocent and guiltless of bloodshed. Thus, interest as well as justice will be served.⁵¹

(576F)

⁴⁷ Cf. *De genio* 576D, 579E, 585D; *Vit. Pel.* 3.6; *Vit. Agesil.* 27.4; *De lib. ed.* 8B, and among modern scholars Barigazzi (1994) 220–228; Georgiadou (1995) and (1996); Brenk (1996). On Epaminondas' 'Platonism' (in the sense of harmonious union of Socratic, Academic, and Pythagorean themes), cf. Donini (2011).

⁴⁸ Cf. now Pelling (2008). After all, this was the opinion of his adversaries, who held him in little esteem, claiming he was ἀπράγμων διὰ φιλοσοφίαν (*Vit. Pelop.* 5.4). Taking a cue from these hurdles, Babut (1984) 70–75 showed support for the ideal of contemplative life in Epaminondas in contrast with that of active life in statesmen.

⁴⁹ Clearly, the same also goes for Socrates, cf. Georgiadou (1996) 118–122.

⁵⁰ Donini (2011) 408–409 n. 24, rightly draws a parallel with the *Republic*, where the philosopher's true duties of government are set apart from the military functions of warriors.

⁵¹ Cf. also 594B–C: 'He was perfectly well informed, he replied, of the day appointed for the exiles' return; indeed Gorgias and he had organized their friends for the occasion. But he would never put a countryman to death without trial unless driven to it by extreme

The importance of this passage can be gleaned by contrasting it with some other passages, drawn from the *Praecepta* and from the same *De genio*:

Yet certainly it is not fitting in time of disorder to sit without feeling or grief, singing the praises of your own impassiveness and of the inactive and blessed life, and rejoicing in the follies of others (τὴν περὶ αὐτὸν ἀταραξία ὑμνοῦντα καὶ τὸν ἀπράγμονα βίον καὶ μακάριον);⁵² on the contrary, at such times you should by all means put on the buskin of Theramenes, conversing with both parties and joining neither; for you will appear to be, not an outsider by not joining in wrongdoing, but a common partisan of all by coming to their aid (τῷ βοηθεῖν κοινὸς εἶναι πάντων). (Praec. 824A–B)

Even more eloquent is the passage in *De genio* that deals with the riddle-like messages of the gods, and recalls a recommendation by Plato—references to Plato should never be underestimated. A first example centers on a mysterious inscription written in unknown characters (hieroglyphs), which is then construed as a message from the gods, who ‘urge the Greeks to live in the enjoyment of leisure and peace by always taking philosophy as their field of contention, laying their arms aside and settling their disputes about right and wrong by an appeal to the Muses and discussion’.⁵³

Reference is forthwith made to Plato, when the people of Delos seek his counsel on a ‘strange response from the god’ that pledged to put an end to their woes, on condition that an altar be built at Delos twice the size of the existing one. Plato construed the response as an exhortation to study geometry in earnest and explained the importance of the median point between two extremes (a prefiguration of the *daimones* and the philosopher), going on to say that

they were not, however, to suppose that it was this the god desired, but rather that he was ordering the entire Greek nation to give up war and its miseries and cultivate the Muses, and by calming their passions through the practice of discussion and study of mathematics, so to live with one another that their intercourse should be not injurious, but profitable. (579C–D)

necessity. Apart from this it was to the interest of the people of Thebes that there should be some men not chargeable with the guilt of what was done: these would enjoy the greater confidence of the people, as their counsels would be less suspected of bias’ (trans. De Lacy-Einarson slightly modified).

⁵² Once again it is possible to detect an attack against the Epicureans, cf. *supra*, § I.

⁵³ *De genio* 579A: παραινέειν τοῖς Ἕλλησι διὰ τῶν γραμμάτων τὸν θεὸν ἀγειν σχολὴν καὶ εἰρήνην διὰ φιλοσοφίας ἀγωνιζομένους ἀεὶ, Μούσαις καὶ λόγῳ διακρινομένους περὶ τῶν δικαίων τὰ ὅπλα καταθέοντας. *Schole*, therefore, does not have a negative connotation in itself, but only when it fails to yield results (cf. also *Vit. Pelop.* 4.1 regarding Epaminondas, whose courage and initiative are praised on top of his thirst for learning, cf. 4.7 and 7.4).

Plutarch regards Epaminondas as the full-fledged, archetypal philosopher—as a true daemonic leader of men, above and beyond the juxtaposition between contemplative thinkers and political men. On the strength of his privileged relationship with the divinity, the philosopher must seek to promote the values of the divine world among men, not stooping to their lowly political wrangling, but facilitating their heaven-bound ascent; his duty is to help them rise to the blissful state he has already attained alongside the god. This is his task: to help others become virtuous—which means helping them unite with their divine part within. And this lays the foundation for a world and a social order structured upon and in harmony with divine justice—which means bringing mankind and the universe together. If the debate on *bios philosophos* is also a vindication of philosophy, one cannot help but notice that the one put forward by Plutarch amounts to a grand celebration of philosophy, proudly reasserting its practical and political significance at a historical time in which room for action was shrinking fast.

IV. *A Few Closing Remarks*

Before coming to an end, however, there is another aspect of Plutarch's reflections that deserves to be covered in more depth. If my reconstruction is correct, what has emerged so far is Plutarch's skillfulness at perceptively handling a topic of great philosophical interest, such as the debate on the ways of life, and put it to novel use to present an image of Platonism, i.e. of philosophy, that befits the cultural context of his time. Moving from a Platonic perspective, Plutarch essentially rejects the contraposition between active and contemplative life as if they were two separate kinds of life addressing distinct objects and competences: Platonism is the philosophy that is capable of overcoming this false conflict, not by committing itself first to *theoria* and then to *praxis* (the model for mixed life), but by displaying the necessary union that should bind *theoria* and *praxis*. Consequently, Plutarch is able to outline an ideal model of philosophy that can still aspire to fulfill an 'architectonic' role (to adopt an Aristotelian image, cf. *Eth. Nic.* 1.2), even if played out in a wholly different world from the one Plato lived in. For sure, Plutarch was not alone in defending the key role of the philosopher. But it would be a grossly unfair claim to say that his proud reaffirmation of the philosopher's political-pedagogical role and its arrangement in a grand metaphysical framework lack originality.

Rather, one might ask yet another question. Plutarch's design was grand—but was it not naïve as well? Is there a risk that such a 'daemonic' representation of the philosopher might be too naïve with respect to reality and historical fact? After all even Plato had felt the full weight of this problem, as is apparent from his dialogues and from his own life. As has been rightly pointed out, the dialogues are an even grander vindication of philosophy than the one we find in Plutarch. Yet the dialogues constantly evoke the possibility that philosophy might fail, carrying the risk of dwindling to mere hollow verbal exercise. This too belongs to the legacy of Socrates.⁵⁴

So then, what about Plutarch? He was thought not to be aware of these issues. Traditionally, Plutarch projects an edifying image, being praised for his grace and composure, and revered as the moralist capable of fair and impartial assessments across the board. But that is not so: when not busy arguing against other philosophical schools, or vindicating Platonism and philosophy, Plutarch shows deep awareness of the issue surrounding the limits of philosophy, proving once again that he may not be an outstanding philosopher but is certainly a highly responsive reader of Plato. Evidence of this awareness is indeed found in the least predictable of settings, namely, when dealing with those characters deemed by Plutarch to come closest to the model of the daemonic philosopher-adviser: Plato, Dion, and Epaminondas.⁵⁵ Take for example the case of Plato and Dion:⁵⁶ the relationship between Plato and Dion represents the paradigmatic example of the practical importance of philosophy, and of the need for an alliance between philosophy and politics, as constantly reiterated in his texts, in the above-mentioned passages of *Adv. Col.* and *Life of Nicias*, and in many other passages elsewhere. But the most important work of all, *Life of Dion*, does not contain praise alone. When Dion came to power, he acted like a true philosopher, behaving in a morally irreproachable way: 'as though he was messing with Plato in the Academy' (52.3). But to live one's life in thrall to the Academy—as if it were the only concern—is not always the best policy to follow, given that the Academy heaped no praise on either successful endeavors or acts of daring or victories, but only cherished a life of sobriety, moderation and wisdom (52.4). So when the ill-famed Heraclides (a disease for the city, 47.3) is finally captured, the lesson bestowed by the Academy—

⁵⁴ Cf. e.g. *Resp.* 496c–d; *Ep.* VII 328b–c.

⁵⁵ Remarkably Dion and Epaminondas are bound together against Epicureans in *Lat. viv.* 1129B, and even presented both as Πλάτωνος συνουσιασταί in *De lib. ed.* 8B (cf. *supra*, n. 21). The same applies to Socrates, another one of Plutarch's models, cf. Pelling (2005).

⁵⁶ Crucial here is Pelling (2004) 91–97.

successfully mastering anger, rage, and feelings of contention—makes him take a lenient attitude. Dion ‘wished men to see that he was superior to Heraclides not so much in power and wisdom as in goodness and justice’ and was loath ‘to sully his virtue’ (47.5–8) on account of Heraclides. But the outcome was politically doomed, and the situation was settled only when, long after, Dion commanded that Heraclides be killed (53.6). How should we evaluate this? Should we infer that Dion misconstrued Plato’s teachings? Or is the opposite not true, namely, that philosophical ideals do not always fit in with the harshness of reality? As suggested by *De Genio* the correct answer may be that the teachings of philosophy are not instrumental to the real political debate, because they strive towards a different and (as Plutarch would say) nobler goal. Still, the task is objectively difficult, and if Plato has been unable to correct some of Dion’s moral flaws, then Epaminondas, Plutarch’s role model, cannot persuade men steeped in the passions of life to look elsewhere (μη πείθων· ἐπεὶ οὐ πείθει τοὺς πολλούς, 576F). And so the philosopher has little choice but to abide by his median position: halfway between the world of men and that of the gods, a witness to another way of understanding life, withdrawn (in silence: 592F) in a sort of limbo, at peace (583C) thanks to the harmony he has reached, but perhaps also concerned about the disarray in which others live. The daemonic time of philosophy is not always capable of effectively fitting in with the time of history,⁵⁷ and a few cracks start to appear in the grand framework that is Platonism. But this is not to say that the framework would necessarily collapse. It is rather a question of acknowledging that, while the philosopher may be daemonic, projected towards the deity, and even strengthened by his privileged contact with it, he still remains a man, and as such cannot expect to achieve everything. Only the gods ensure true salvation: the philosopher has no option but to turn his gaze towards them and endeavor to help others do the same, being the full-fledged model—inasmuch as possible—of the virtuous union between *theoria* and *praxis*. Ultimately, rather than the grandiose glorification of its own merits, it is this striving towards goodness that embodies the most stimulating aspect of Plutarch’s Platonism—and even of Plato’s philosophy, in which the questions and concerns are no less numerous nor less important than the answers.

⁵⁷ On the issue of time, with particular regard to daemonic time, cf. Brenk (1996) and (2002) 110; cf. also Desideri (1984).