Efficiency and Effectiveness of Plutarch’s Broadcasting Ethics

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Ever since Plato, philosophy faced the question as to what extent its experts were expected to play an active role in society. Should the philosopher descend again into the cave in order to share his high insights with his fellow citizens and make them better? Plato himself answered in the positive, as did the Stoics later. Through their notorious ἀναισχυντία and their shocking conduct, even the Cynics advocated a radical moral message. Epicurus, by contrast, as a rule refrained from entering into public life¹, although this withdrawal obviously does not imply that he refused to benefit other people². Similarly, the ideal of a pure vita contemplativa, far away from the turmoil of politics, no doubt remained attractive for many philosophers of different schools³, but even such a theoretical life need not have been sterile and other-worldly. Maximus of Tyre even argues that a contemplative philosopher such as Anaxagoras contributed no less to social harmony and to the preservation of the state than his more public-spirited colleagues (XVI, 3).

Although most philosophers were thus willing to benefit in their own ways their neighbours, cities, and even the world at large⁴, the question remains whether their voices were heard by the ordinary citizens. Some of the most respected philosophers, it is true, were from

¹ Although he was prepared to take into account several exceptions; on Epicurus’ apolitical philosophy, see most recently Roskam (2007a).
² Strikingly enough, one of the clearest examples of a philosopher who tried to benefit as many persons as possible may well be that of the Epicurean Diogenes of Oenoanda, who undertook to divulge Epicurean philosophy through a monumental inscription in his native city.
³ The classic study of the ideals of vita activa and vita contemplativa is Joly (1956). For Plutarch’s position towards this question, see, e.g., Riley (1977); Babut (1984); Georgiadou (1995), 192-95.
⁴ Cf., e.g., the position of Ariston of Chios, who talked with everyone and expressed his wish that even the beasts could understand his words (see Plutarch, Maxime cum principibus 776C = SVF I, 382).
lower social classes. Socrates, for instance, though an Athenian citizen, was the son of a mason and a midwife. Cleanthes was a former boxer (Diogenes Laertius VII, 168) and Epictetus even a former slave. But did they really succeed in spreading their messages to the large group of artisans, farmers, or soldiers? Apart from a few exceptions, it is most unlikely. Simon the shoemaker associated with Socrates and later published many Socratic dialogues on different subjects5. And there is the charming anecdote of the Corinthian farmer who read Plato’s Gorgias and left his field in order to ‘plant’ Plato’s doctrines (Themistius, Orat. XXIII, 295cd). But the great majority would probably side with the Tracian servant girl who jeered at Thales after he fell into a pit while studying the stars (Plato, Tht. 174a).

Plutarch of Chaeronea (° ca. 45-† ca. 125 AD), Platonist, polymath, and prolific writer, was by no means an armchair philosopher. He strongly believed in the necessity for a philosopher to affect the lives of his fellow citizens. In his short work Maxime cum principibus philosopho esse disserendum, for instance, he argues that a public-spirited philosopher should try to maximize his usefulness by associating with a ruler, thus benefiting πολλοὺς δι᾿ ἑνός (777A and 778E)6. And Plutarch himself practiced what he preached, for he served his fellow citizens as a teacher, as a politician, and as a priest of Apollo. Even his own life thus showed his eagerness to promote the individual and social welfare of his fellow men.

The same urge inspired many of his writings that sought to meet what he considered people’s true needs. Posternity has much appreciated those writings and privileged their preservation. ZIEGLER, in his basic article on Plutarch, recognizes that Plutarch’s particular strength as an author was situated precisely in these ‘popular-philosophical’ writings7, and in his classification of the Chaeronean’s œuvre, the so-called ‘popularphilosophisch-ethische Schriften’ go first. Yet ZIEGLER

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5 Diogenes Laertius, II, 122-123; see further Hock (1976) and Sellars (2003).
6 See Roskam (2009).
7 Ziegler (1951), 702: “... so erweckt doch eine Durchmusterung dieser erhaltenen ‘Moralia’ den Eindruck, daß die popularphilosophische Belehrung (einschließlich der theologischen und pädagogischen Arbeiten) innerhalb der Schriftstellerei P.s durchaus, auch mengenmäßig, im Vordergrunde gestanden und das Übrige gleichsam nur eine Appendix gebildet habe. […] Die Popularphilosophie hat also innerhalb der Schriftstellerei P.s nur einen, wenn auch bedeutenden, Sektor gebildet, vielleicht ein Drittel, und allerdings scheint es, daß hier die besondere Stärke des Autors gelegen und die Nachwelt recht daran getan hat, vorwiegend diese Schriften (und die innerlich zu ihnen gehörigen Parallelbiographien) immer wieder zu studieren und zu vervielfältigen.”
nowhere makes his criteria explicit for placing singular writings under this heading (nor, for that matter, for excluding some). There is even a remarkable shift in Ziegler’s presentation: in the table of contents (col. 637) of the article, he groups twenty-one authentic writings under that heading, but later on (col. 703) he broadens the class by adding five ‘pädagogische Schriften’, though again without explaining his motives.

Ziegler’s ‘palinode’ – based, to our minds, on a sound intuition – triggers many questions that are central to this volume. Indeed, the problem of classification is not just an ‘academic’ one. A classification of writings, just as a classification of sciences, presupposes the knowledge of their ‘core business’, and as such involves an overall assessment of the proper nature (structure and theme) and aim of each writing, as well as a detailed observation and explanation of their interrelations (concerning theme and aim). Is there a common purpose and procedure of the ‘popular-philosophical’ writings? A priori it is likely that they want to affect actual morality and replace it with a more systematic philosophic ethics, but if that is true, then what is at the core of this ethical project? And also, do the popular-philosophical writings share a common set of logical arguments and literary devices with which Plutarch tries to convince his audience of the necessity and feasibility of a genuine ethical philosophy? How do the ‘popular-philosophical’ writings interrelate? Are we supposed to believe that they are non-technical by nature and that they address a public of non-specialists? But what then about De virtute morali, a theoretical anti-Stoic polemic and defence of the Academic point of view? Genre does not seem to be the unifying factor either: dialogue (e.g., De cohibenda ira), treatise (e.g., De profectibus in virtute), consolatio (e.g., the Consolatio ad uxorem), and letter-essay (e.g., De tranquillitate animi) are all represented in the group. Yet at the same time, why is a work such as An virtus doceri sit excluded from this class? If its highly rhetorical outlook is the reason for its exclusion, its very theme clearly suggests a strong link with “popularphilosophisch-ethische Schriften mit einschluß der pädagogischen”.

It is clear, then, that Plutarch’s ‘popular-philosophical’ writings raise many particularly challenging questions, not only because the writings

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8 As the set of pre-reflexive principles actually applied by the public addressed; cf. Dover (1974), 1-5. This morality has to be inferred from Plutarch’s writings themselves. In De cohibenda ira, for instance, Plutarch declares that the common view on anger as a sign of (male) bravery or righteous indignation is a misunderstanding (456F and 462EF); cf. also De frat. am. 482C.


10 Ziegler (1951), 703.
involved do not always at first sight seem thematically related, but also because of the large number of writings. Moreover, in spite of the intensive scientific research on the Corpus Plutarcheum during the last two decades, Plutarch’s ‘popular-philosophical’ writings have attracted only limited scholarly attention. They have never been studied as a group\textsuperscript{11} and most of them still lack a proper literary analysis (including questions of genre, addressed public, cultural embedding) or thorough philosophical discussion. The nineteenth century, however, devoted to Quellenforschung, produced much valuable material\textsuperscript{12} that, if prudently handled, is instrumental to the assessment of Plutarch’s own authorial aims and philosophical stance. Especially the parallels which Quellenforschung laid bare allow for ‘explaining Plutarch by Plutarch’\textsuperscript{13} and establishing interrelations between various writings, particularly through the analysis of repetitive clusters\textsuperscript{14}. Moreover, concerning the subclass of the psychotherapeutic writings, Ingenkamp has done excellent work: he analyses the train of thought of the essays involved and discusses their theme as well as their structure from the perspective of Plutarch’s psychotherapeutic method\textsuperscript{15}.

The present volume contains a collection of essays that were originally presented at an international conference at Delphi and that focus on different aspects of Plutarch’s ‘popular philosophy’ in general and on his ‘popular-philosophical’ writings in particular. The volume is subdivided into four main parts, which deal with this rich material from different perspectives and together throw new light upon the important and multifaceted domain of Plutarch’s thinking and writing.

In the first part (Virtues for the people), several key questions relating to the concept of ‘popular philosophy’ and its implications are discussed. What may be understood by Plutarch’s ‘popular philosophy’? What kinds of virtues are recommended and who is addressed? What is the social context and relevance of Plutarch’s philosophical advice?

A correct, historically sound understanding of the notion of ‘popular philosophy’ may take its point of departure in a study of what Ziegler probably understood by the term Popularphilosophie. Luc

\textsuperscript{11} The work of Betz (1978), apart from being incomplete, treats the essays independently and largely without attention to their interrelations.

\textsuperscript{12} See also Mansfeld (1999), 14.

\textsuperscript{13} Cf., e.g., Van der Stockt (2006).

\textsuperscript{14} See on the cluster-method, e.g., L. Van der Stockt (1999a); Id. (1999b); Id. (2004).

\textsuperscript{15} See Ingenkamp (1971); cf. also Id. (2000).
Van der Stockt shows that this concept should in all likelihood be traced back to a philosophical movement in the German Aufklärung. Concerned with the social relevance of philosophy, Popularphilosophen tried to educate the people towards happiness and tranquillity of mind by introducing them to practicable truths through rhetorical discourse. A careful analysis of Plutarch’s *De amicorum multitudine* (compared with other ‘popular philosophers’ such as Themistius and Maximus of Tyre) reveals a broadly similar approach: Plutarch’s arguments in this work often lack solid logical demonstration; frequently appeal to the emotions, common sense, and self-esteem of his target audience; and recommend a clear ideal of ‘exclusive’ friendship.

Chris Pelling connects the notion of ‘popular philosophy’ with the demotic sort of wisdom that is mentioned in the *Life of Solon*. It is a wisdom that has to do with moderation (μετριότης) and that can often be reached by ‘ordinary’ people more easily than by powerful statesmen or brilliant philosophers. This wisdom, however, which is not limited to the Greeks, is beyond the great multitude, which can at best be educated towards virtue by cultivated, responsible politicians and needs their moral and political guidance. In the *Parallel Lives*, then, popular philosophy is not demotic or vulgar thinking but the philosophy of the educated and refined pepaideumenoi.

That Plutarch primarily addressed these pepaideumenoi in his *Parallel Lives* is shown by Tim Duff, who points out that the *Lives* only rarely contain explicit and straightforward moral evaluations and/or advice. The general, paired structure of the *Lives*, the significant amount of thematic overlap between different *Lives*, the subtle techniques of focalization, and the introduction of an additional perspective in the final *synkriseis* all stimulate the reader’s active reflection and invite him to make necessary distinctions and qualifications. Such an attitude of critical reading was often recommended in ancient pedagogical contexts and can actually be found several times in Plutarch’s *Moralia* (esp. in *De audiendis poetis*). Plutarch’s readers, in short, are not satisfied with easy answers or ready-made conclusions, but actively engage with the text, form their own judgements about it, and are able to derive from it moral lessons which they can apply to their own individual situations.

The question remains, then, how these pepaideumenoi can, on the basis of their own sophisticated and critical reflection, assume their honourable task of educating their fellow citizens in the concrete political context of Plutarch’s day. This problem is examined by Paolo Desideri, who confronts Plutarch’s major political treatises with several speeches of Plutarch’s contemporary Dio of Prusa and with Aelius Aristides’ famous oration *Regarding Rome*. One of the principal tasks of the statesman, in Plutarch’s view, consists of finding a delicate
equilibrium between respect for the Roman ruler and the preservation of as much local autonomy as possible. To that purpose, he should take care that concord in the city is maintained. The people, once again, turn out to be a passive object, and although the façade of democracy is never completely pulled down, fundamentally, the local aristocratic πρῶτοι are pulling the strings. Once again, then, the question remains as to whether virtues for the people become virtues of the people.

The next two contributions throw further light on the paramount importance of the social context for Plutarch’s ethical reflections. In her study of *De tuenda sanitate praecepta*, Lieve Van Hoof shows how Plutarch, while writing for φιλόλογοι καὶ πολιτικοί, often appeals to their pre-philosophical presuppositions and sense of honour, taking into account the demands of their social status and taking care that his dietetic (or diet-ethical) advice can be reconciled with their actual lives. At the same time, Plutarch in different ways tries to support his claim of authority as a philosopher on medical topics. Rather than turning his learned and public-spirited readers into professional philosophers, he prefers to reserve the respected role of philosopher for himself.

The close connection between Plutarch’s philosophy and real life is also underlined by Iolanda Capriglione. In her view, the Chaeronean was not interested in developing abstract, unworldly theories or a rigid set of rules, but recognised the importance of concrete πρᾶξις in a social context. His moral advice neither ignores parameters such as usefulness (χρέεια) and common sense, nor disregards the relevance of the particular circumstances. Decisions should be made on the basis of παιδεία and calculating intelligence. This perspective underlies Plutarch’s general view of the passions (as appears from his rejection of Stoic ἀπάθεια as an unfeasible ideal), and in particular his treatise *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate*, which rejects an ideal world without enemies as imaginary and prefers to take (moral) advantage of the less ideal situation in which enmity is an important factor in social life.

Plutarch, then, did not philosophise *in vacuo*. The fact, however, that Plutarch’s ‘popular philosophy’, or his ‘popular-philosophical’ writings, were closely connected with a concrete, contemporary socio-political context does not imply that they largely ignored theoretical questions. A few such fundamental questions are discussed in the second part of this volume (*Some theoretical questions on ethical praxis*).

The first paper in this part still recalls the fundamental importance of concrete life for Plutarch’s thinking, as it was discussed in the previous section of this volume. Hubert Martin raises the interesting question whether Plutarch’s ethical thinking should be regarded
as consequentialist or non-consequentialist. The famous proem of the
Life of Pericles clearly shows a non-consequentialist approach: the
decision to perform a particular virtuous action does not rest on a care-
ful calculus of benefits or harms but on a kind of moral state which
precedes and is conducive to this virtuous action. Yet this perspective
is counterbalanced by other passages where Plutarch argues that the
statesman should not merely bear in mind his own moral excellence
but also take care of public interest. This concern for the welfare of
one’s fellow citizens, however, entails a consequentialist perspective
which prefers τὸ συμφέρον to τὸ δίκαιον. Traces of both perspectives can
often be found in the Lives, and this ‘flexible inconsistency’, which is
ultimately rooted in the complex variety of the material world, is in
itself a striking illustration of Plutarch’s humanity.

Jan Opsomer deals with the complex relationship among virtue,
luck, and ‘happiness’ or success in Plutarch’s works. Theoretical treatises
such as De virtute morali provide an interesting general perspective
that reveals Plutarch’s fundamental willingness to take into account
levels of irrational disorder and passions, of contingency and luck.
More detailed information can be found in the Lives. The Life of
Dion, for instance, throws light on the interaction between nature and
education and its implications for the problem of ‘moral luck’, and
on the traditional question of the self-sufficiency of virtue, whereas
other Lives clarify to what extent perfect (or imperfect) virtue can
be corrupted by bad fortune. All of these passages illustrate Plutarch’s
acknowledgement of the moral relevance of contingent circumstances
and show that he developed a well-considered, subtly balanced posi-
tion towards the particularly complex topic of the interplay between
virtue and luck.

In the last paper of this section, Geert Roskam focuses on Plutarch’s
position towards parental love for children. At first sight, this may
seem a typical topic of ‘popular philosophy’, closely connected as it
is with everyday life, yet a study of the philosophical tradition before
Plutarch shows that it was also a much-discussed issue in theoretical
debates among different schools. Plutarch’s De amore prolis should be
understood, against this theoretical background, as an attack against
the Epicurean view of parental love. Plutarch borrows many argu-
ments from the previous literary and philosophical (Platonic, Stoic,
and Peripatetic) traditions, and rhetorically reworks them for his own
polemical purposes.

Although such theoretical questions are far from irrelevant for Plutarch’s
‘popular philosophy’, in that they actually deal with several of its presup-
positions or implications and thus provide important information about
the speculative background against which the ‘popular-philosophical’
writings should be understood, they probably do not constitute the core of Plutarch’s ‘popular philosophy’. No less important in this respect is Plutarch’s concern with moral education and his repeated attempts to cure the most different passions of the soul. Various aspects of his elaborate and fairly systematic moral psychagogy and of his interest in, and treatment of, moral issues in the *Moralia* and the *Lives* are discussed in the third part of this book (*Virtues and vices*).

Three of Plutarch’s treatises that are devoted to ‘minor’ foibles (*De garrulitate*, *De curiositate*, and *De vitiioso pudore*) are carefully analysed by Anastasios Nikolaidis. The three works show basically the same tripartite structure and contain fairly similar arguments, although each of them also has peculiar features. That Plutarch gives so much attention to these, at first sight, rather unimportant weaknesses may be explained by two reasons: they both show irrational disorder and a diseased soul in need of a moral cure, and they can have pernicious consequences for social life. Plutarch’s therapy of these foibles rests on rational reflection and habituation, while taking into account many lessons from the rich previous tradition and preferring common sense to excessive moral rigidity.

Whereas the above three treatises belong to the group of Plutarch’s ‘psychotherapeutic’ writings, *De vitando aere alieno* does not directly aim at *Seelenheilung*. Heinz-Gerd Ingenkamp demonstrates that this work should rather be regarded as a moral *suasoria* or ὁμιλία, in which Plutarch promotes (the traditional ideal of) an interiorized αὐτάρκεια and σχολή as a corrective of erroneous convictions regarding borrowing. Quite remarkable in *De vitando aere alieno* is the great number of logical flaws in Plutarch’s argument, which shows that the author primarily addresses a (virtual) group of half-cultivated and not particularly rich people who want to be entertained by the speaker’s embellished discourse and are willing to accept more than one obvious *non sequitur*.

In dealing with the passion of competitiveness or the desire to win (φιλονικία), Philip Stadter focuses on an important aspect of the agonistic Greek world which no doubt continued to play a crucial role in the social and political life of Plutarch’s day. In classical authors, φιλονικία appears as an ambivalent term, and a similar ambivalence can in fact be found in Plutarch’s works as well. In the *Moralia*, competitiveness is almost exclusively negative: it is a passion which threatens to destroy harmony and concord in both the ὁἶκος and the πόλις. Several *Lives*, by contrast, suggest a more differentiating view: φιλονικία can yield positive results, provided that it is governed by reason and aims at honourable ideals (such as the freedom of Greece). When, however, the politician gives free rein to his competitive passion, so that it becomes excessive, it has destructive and pernicious consequences for himself and his community.
Moral progress, the therapy of wickedness, and reflection on virtues and vices are no doubt part and parcel of Plutarch’s ‘popular philosophy’. Yet this ‘popular philosophy’ is not merely a synonym of moral edification. To the extent that it deals with common experience and everyday life, its domain is much broader and much more varied, as is demonstrated in the last part of this volume (‘Popular philosophy in context’).

**Aurelio Pérez Jiménez** deals with the presence of astrometeorological opinions in Plutarch’s works. Whereas such convictions about the direct influence of the sun, the moon, and the stars on the sublunary world of plants, animals, and human beings can sometimes be traced back to the previous literary or scientific tradition, they often appear to be rooted in popular belief. While Plutarch is interested in such widespread but uncritical convictions, he does not confine himself merely to mentioning them but also tries to rationalize and/or explain them from a scientific, philosophical, or religious and eschatological perspective. In his view, these scientific or physical explanations contribute to the refutation of superstitious opinions, while remaining perfectly compatible with authentic piety.

The discussion now turns from the stars to the beasts. Animals have always occupied an important place in human life, in antiquity no less than now. In *De sollertia animalium* and *Bruta animalia ratione uti* (or *Gryllus*), Plutarch argues against the Stoics that animals are not entirely devoid of reason. **Judith Mossman** and **Frances Titchener** show how Plutarch develops this philosophical position in a fairly sophisticated rhetorical way. Against the background of a general framework in which technical discussion has to yield to entertaining empirical observation, Plutarch uses metaphors, comparisons, and an anthropomorphic approach as argumentative strategies in order to blur the clear-cut distinction between animals and human beings. At the same time, subtle allusions to celebrated works of classical authors (such as Xenophon’s *Cynegeticus*) add to the literary quality of the works, whereas the mise-en-scène and the characterization of the participants in the dialogues helps in avoiding the danger of ‘one-dimensionality’.

The above paper thus illustrates, as so many others in this volume, the paramount importance of rhetoric and literary embellishment in a context of ‘popular philosophy’. This also holds true for the last contribution, in which **Françoize Frazier** examines the imagery of the mirror in Plutarch’s œuvre. Her study shows how Plutarch perfectly succeeds in reconciling the thoroughly Platonic use of this image with its more ordinary use in a moral context. The mirror indeed functions both as a kind of mediator between the intelligible and the sensible realm and as an instrument which contributes to self-knowledge and enables people to refashion themselves while looking at the paradigmatic excellence of other men (esp. the famous statesmen of the past).
In this sense, Plutarch’s use of the image of the mirror is a beautiful illustration of the harmonious combination of common topics and more fundamental philosophical issues, and of a literary and a more theoretical approach, a combination that is one of the basic features of Plutarch’s ‘popular philosophy’.