Semper duo, numquam tres?
Plutarch’s Popularphilosophie
on Friendship and Virtue in
On having many friends

L. Van der Stockt

1. Plutarch’s On having many friends and Popularphilosophie

1.1. Popularphilosophie

K. Ziegler’s article “Ploutarchos” in RE, 1951, as a status quae-
tionis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholarship on Plutarch, was at the same time the influential forerunner of the renaissance of Plutarch studies that was soon to come. In that article, Ziegler offered a classification of Plutarch’s works and constructed fourteen categories, one of which is entitled ‘Die popularphilosophisch-ethischen Schriften’ and includes On having many friends.

We take it that Ziegler used the term Popularphilosophie against the background of the history of German philosophy, and that he applied to a group of Plutarchan works the activity of a number of philosophers of the German Aufklärung in the second half of the eighteenth century. A short exploration1 of the main characteristics of this German Popularphilosophie will allow us to throw some light on Plutarch’s own philosophical activity and notably also on his ‘popular philosophical’ works. In fact, those familiar with Plutarch will hear the bell ringing several times.

As a historiographical term, Popularphilosophie refers to a move-
ment that, although clearly inspired by the ideas of Enlightenment, constructed an educational project that stood somewhat apart from the (mathematical) rationalism that was de rigueur in the German University programs then. In fact, Popularphilosophie was generally rather averse to committing itself to one system or doctrine. Devoted to the idea of

1 This paragraph is based on Holzhey (1989); van der Zande (1995); Brown (2001); Copleston (2003 [= 1960]); Ueberweg (195313).
independent, personal judgement (“in the sense of open-mindedness and readiness to question ill-founded authority”)\(^2\), it welcomed any argument (especially the kind of argument that testified to ‘common sense’, ‘common experience’, or ‘sense perception’), and it was in this sense eclectic. Besides, professional, academic philosophers were felt to be isolated from society, and \textit{Popularphilosophen} were convinced that philosophy should have a positive social function.

The overall goal of \textit{Popularphilosophie} was indeed to make man perfect and happy (it was, in this sense, philanthropic), and its conviction was that this could be realised by educating people. Education of people operates through the communication of “truths that educate people and free them from harmful notions”.

This ‘communication of truths’, however, is not to be understood as the ‘communication of comprehensive technical-philosophical systems’. The truths to be communicated belonged to what we now call physics, moral philosophy, political science, history, geography, anthropology, and so on. \textit{Popularphilosophie}, like most ancient philosophy, was encyclopaedic and did not make a sharp distinction between philosophy and science. At the same time, the communication of truths, it was felt, should take its root in practical experience – there was, in fact, a strong emphasis on practical philosophy – and “everyday and interesting subjects”\(^3\). These subjects were to be treated in the Socratic way: “beginning playfully, it should end with instruction”\(^4\). Cautious deliberation over these subjects would end in what was, for \textit{Popularphilosophie} as \textit{Lebensphilosophie}, the highest aim in human life: \textit{tranquillitas animi}.

Communicating and assimilating ‘truths’, then, boils down to being a philosopher for the world, for society, for a broad (and educated!) audience\(^5\). It follows that \textit{Popularphilosophie} was “deliberately rhetorical in nature”: “for the popular philosophers rhetoric created the public sphere in which communication in a common language was possible and as such was a means to escape from the logomachies they associated with scholastic learning. Social discord was meaningless and philosophical debate trivial until it resolved into harmony. Broad learning, not specialization, and the art of conversation, not a scholar’s jargon, were the first requisites for these purposes”\(^6\).

\(^2\) Van der Zande (1995), 434.
\(^3\) Holzhey (1989), 1096, quoting Kant.
\(^5\) Petrus (1995) discusses the question of the readership of popularising scientific texts, and specifically the more or less implicit demands of their authors vis-à-vis their readership.
\(^6\) Van der Zande (1995), 422.
It goes without saying that Ziegler’s label of *Popularphilosophie* suits many of Plutarch’s works, perhaps even more works than those he classified under that category. Plutarch indeed shares with German *Popularphilosophie* several important characteristics. We do not have to dwell on his philanthropy, his educational drive, his rhetorical vein, his devotion to social harmony, his activity as an anthropologist, his inclination to cautious inquiry, his interest in everyday subjects like those discussed in *De vitoso pudore* or *De curiositate*, to his *De tranquillitate animi* and other treatises. His dedication to *Lebensphilosophie* is made very clear in *Old Men in Public Affairs* 796C-E:

Most people think all this [viz. holding office, being ambassador, vociferating in the assembly, etc.] 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 acts and deeds, they fail to perceive…Socrates…was the first to show that life at all times and in all parts, in all experiences and activities, universally admits philosophy7.

1.2. On having many friends

One of the practical topics that attracted Plutarch’s attention was *philia*, the broad spectrum of loving relationships, among which is friendship. On this subject he wrote several essays and letters, all reflecting not only the accumulated Greek scholarship but also his own actual intuition and experience.

*On having many friends* is a short text that starts “playfully” with a witty anecdote (93AB), treats the practical problem of the role of friendship in daily life, and ends with a clear-cut summary of the communicated instruction: “For this reason a steadfast friend is something rare and hard to find” (97B). This closure itself makes it clear that the text is not only a plea about (or against) multiple friendships, as its title would suggest, but also a reflection on, even an exhortation to ‘true friendship’8.

7 All translations are from the *LCL* editions of Plutarch’s works.
8 In the introduction to his edition and translation of the text, Klaerr (1989), 216 states that “le traité dépasse son objet précis, qui est une mise en garde contre la recherche d’amitiés multiples”, but then states that the text becomes “un élément d’une vaste enquête sur l’amitié […] dont la partie positive est malheureusement perdue”. Giannattasio (2000), 226 n. 4 convincingly argues against the suggestion that the text merely constitutes the *pars destruens* on the topic of friendship.
BABBITT suggested that “Plutarch’s essay on friendship may possibly have been offered on some occasion as a lecture”; KLAERR repeated that suggestion, and, apparently on the grounds of its rhetorical vein, dated it “de la fin de la période de formation de l’auteur”. But GIANNATTASIO warns that the formal rhetorical tricks do not necessarily imply that the text was actually delivered as a declamatio: “un testo di qualunque natura, drammatico e non, trovava la sua efficacia nell’ actualizzazione assegnata alla voce”. Perhaps the question whether *On having many friends* was actually delivered as a declamatio or not, comes as close as possible to a satisfactory solution through YAGINUMA’s felicitous interpretation of Plutarch’s style as “‘lecture’-style”: “He wrote primarily with a particular friend in mind, and he therefore wrote as if he were talking to a friend. This is not to say that Plutarch wrote in a colloquial style, but rather that the texts seem to resemble lectures held for a small circle of hearers”.

It remains to be seen, however, in what way that kind of communicative situation bears on the interaction of philosophical tenets with rhetorical invasiveness in this particular ‘lecture’. There are in fact some paradoxes to be elucidated. It seems indeed paradoxical that a man like Plutarch would argue against having many friends: in modern times, he is reputed to have cultivated many friendships himself. And yet, as has been noticed above, *On having many friends* has been considered “a warning against the pursuit of multiple friendships”. Besides, the “warning against multiple friendships” itself seems to be counterintuitive. Clearly, Plutarch upholds a rather exclusive notion of friendship, one that limits its extent through the fullness of its content. And finally: what kind of people was Plutarch talking to? To what kind of people did this essay make sense? Who would be interested in having many friends and/or was in need of a ‘warning’ against multiple friendships? In short, how does the communication operate in *On having many friends*, if it is understood as one of the *Popularphilosophische Schriften*?

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10 Klaerr (1989), 215: “destiné peut-être à une lecture publique”.
12 Giannattasio (2000), 234.
13 Yaginuma (1992), 4741-42.
2. On having many friends §1-2: rhetoric and philosophy

2.1. A sample of Plutarch’s rhetoric

The exordium (§§ 1-2a)\textsuperscript{15}: questioning a common craving

To catch the attention of the audience, one does well to start with a story, an anecdote\textsuperscript{16}. But the witty story of Meno (from Plato, \textit{Meno} 71e) serves other ends as well. It also warns the audience against conceited pseudo-wisdom, and thus appeals to their inquisitiveness. And it also allows for a parallel between virtue and friendship in a way that discredits the very idea of cultivating a plurality of friendships from the start. The exemplum is clearly partial, and it will be effective only inasmuch as the audience will not question the authority and the appropriateness of the example. That is to say: Plutarch presupposes some philosophical background, specifically a certain degree of sympathy with Plato, in his audience, as well as an uncritical adherence to the (unquestioned!) philosophical thesis about virtue.

Apparently that is the case, for on the basis of this tacit consensus Plutarch mercilessly constructs what we call a paradox: the contrast between our craving for many friends and the actual situation: we do not even have a single friend! He is confronting his audience with (a construction of) conflicting values: polyphilia against having a single friend, or ‘true friendship’. That is to say: Plutarch invites his public to take a stand in an ambiguous matter (an amphidoxon: Lausberg # 64, 2), though without leaving much doubt about his own position: craving many friends is ridiculous if one hasn’t even a single one.

But all this is brought up in a very rhetorical way: Plutarch ironically imagines his audience to be \textit{afraid} of having many friends, and at the same time, like a good preacher, he includes himself in his audience (\textit{φοβούμεθα}: 93C). In fact, this is a rhetorical \textit{tour de force}: Plutarch must have known very well that the paradox was a real problem for his audience. His irony, however, allows him to bring his audience, from the start, somewhat closer to his position: they will no longer, for fear of being ridiculous, cling uncritically (\textit{μὴ λάθωμεν}) to their craving for many friends and will realise that, by striving to have multiple friendships, they will prevent themselves from acquiring a single one.

\textsuperscript{15} I propose a structure somewhat different from the one given by Klaerr (1989), 215, who takes § 1 and 2 together as an “introduction”. Πρῶτον μὲν σὺν (93E), however, marks a transition.

\textsuperscript{16} Lausberg (1990\textsuperscript{3}), # 271.
Even more: the daring comparison with licentious women (93C) appeals again to feelings of shame. But then, again, the implicit confession of complicity makes the diagnosis easier to swallow: each one of us is attracted to anything new; the suggestion is that we (ἡμῶν) would be (or better still: each one of us [ἐκαστὸν ἡμῶν] would be) somewhat frivolous...

*The thesis* (§2b): semper duo, numquam tres!

a. Then a solemn and emphatic appeal to tradition limits the ideal number of friends: they “are paired in the bond of friendship” (93EF), as examples from Greek history and myth show. The appeal to the collective (Greek) memory is, of course, an *argumentum ex auctoritate*: the audience is not invited to suggest that there were numerous examples of foes being pairs as well, nor of friends being more than two.

b. Etymology/synonymy/homonymy affords another argument (a friend is ‘the other self’ and can be called ἐταῖρος, that is to say: ἐτερος, the other one of two). But then, of course, this ‘definition’ is a partial construction (with a shift from φίλος to ἐταῖρος!). The audience is invited to be pleased with the clever point, and thus to accept the argument as at least probable: “duality is the measure of friendship” (93E).

c. The trick of a metaphor must serve as a final argument, which comes to an appeal to nature. Let us analyse the train of thought: “We buy friends as well as slaves (!?). You cannot buy many slaves with ‘little money’ (actually the Greek says: ‘little coin’), nor can you buy many friends with ‘little money’. Now the money/coin of friendship is actually ‘little’ in the sense that it is rare. Why is it rare? Because *nature* made that money/coin a most rare combination of ‘goodwill and graciousness combined with virtue, than which nature has nothing more rare’ (93F)”.

We leave it to the reader to question Plutarch’s tacit assumptions (the analogy of slaves/friends, the very idea of buying friends, the identification of the coin with the merchandise), only to observe that they allow him to bring in, almost in passing, a definition of friend-

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17 But not in the audience, nor in the speaker: it would be most ineffective to insult the audience or to debase oneself. Therefore I do not accept Babbit’s insertion of ἡμῖν in 93C.

18 The clearly marked transition (“In the first place then, let us begin at the hearthstone”) invites the audience to be all ears; cf. Lausberg (1990), # 288.

19 Cf. Lausberg (1990), # 392.
ship, and a strongly authoritative argument: the definition is afforded by nature itself. Nature argues against having many friends. Nature argues against polyphilia, as the comparison with rivers also suggests (but are we to believe that love becomes enfeebled by being ‘portioned out’ among many people? Do we split up our love when we love many people?); in fact, it argues for a singular friend, “since also animals [always a strong (Cynical) indication for what is ‘natural’], if they have strongly implanted love for their young, will give birth to but one young” (but surely there are also animals who give birth to and love many young?). “The same goes for humans: our own very Homer [Il. IX, 482; Od. XVI, 19] calls the beloved son ‘the only one’” (but what about parents with many children: are they ‘unloving’, yet alone ‘unnatural’?).

The audience is constantly invited to be led by the comparisons, to accept given definitions, to have faith in tradition and common sense, to trust nature and . . . to side with Plutarch. They are not invited to wonder, to analyse, to scrutinize, to debate. They have to forget that they have been driven out of their natural propensity for multiple friendships and that they have been confronted with the problem of polyphilia as opposed to true friendship. They have to be already somewhat convinced that the number of friends must be limited to two. The thesis prepares the audience to listen benevolently to the probatio.

2.2. A glimpse of philosophy?

So far we have argued that the first two chapters of On having many friends constitute a well wrought piece of rhetoric. In spite of the Platonic opening scene, the ‘philosophical dogma’ has a mainly Aristotelian ring, as has often been observed in general terms. Thus Aristotle is the expected authority for the basic idea that true friendship is possible between a limited number of persons only (EN IX, 10), and there is allusion to Aristotle in the proposition that “a friend is another self” (EN IX, 4, 1166a32; IX, 8, 1169b6; IX, 9, 1170b6), and that “friendship is a unity of three ingredients: goodwill, graciousness and virtue”.

One might even conjecture that the definition of

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20 Plutarch must have realized that he was skating on thin ice. In § 3, he will immediately accept that one can have more than one friend, if only there is this one special, best friend...


22 Klaerr (1989), 219 n. 4 points out that, as far as the idea of canonical “duos” of friends are concerned, one may compare Plutarch with EN IX, 10, 1171a15: “the friends one sings about (i.e. in poetry) go by pairs”.

friendship as a σύννομον ζῷον is a deliberate variation on Aristotle’s definition of a human being as a πολιτικὸν ζῷον. It is, however, remarkable that Plutarch seems to know only one kind of friendship, viz. ‘true friendship’ (ἡ ἀληθινὴ φιλία: 94B), whereas Aristotle knew three kinds, one of which is the ‘perfect friendship’ (τελεία φιλία: EN VIII.3.6). Aristotle’s doubts as to whether friendship for the sake of pleasure or for the sake of utility really deserves that name have no place in Plutarch’s talk. The ‘true friendship’ is the ‘perfect’ one, and there seem to be no alternatives24. Clearly, Plutarch wanted to create a polar opposition at the cost of philosophical nuance and doubt. He must have considered his own authority impressive enough to be able to confront his audience with the dilemma ‘true friendship or multiple friendships’ without their starting to quote Aristotle. And this strategy in turn strengthens his authority: firmly pleading for true friendship, this Plutarch is most likely a perfect friend!

At the same time, however, the ‘philosophical dogma’ is also no more than a collection of topoi25, unquestioned commonplaces which take their authority from ‘common sense’. As such, they are fertile ground for an adroit speaker. It is indeed not likely that our author simply copies a specific peripatetic source. The way of arguing (by comparison, anecdote, and example), the authors explicitly referred to in § 1 (Plato; Menander, one of Plutarch’s favourites), the images from daily life, the very way of developing a train of thought – in sum, the very texture – bear Plutarch’s own personal stamp. And Plutarch must have considered the potential of the materia involved to be so great, that he recycled it when dealing with this other kind of philia, brotherly love:

<table>
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<td><strong>On having many friends</strong> §§ 1-2 (93C-94A)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A.</strong> Briareus of a hundred hands</td>
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<td><strong>B.</strong> Menander II, 743 Körte: “if he but have the shadow of a friend”</td>
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<td><strong>C.</strong> craving for numerous friends compared to lascivious women</td>
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<td><strong>D.</strong> idea of pairs, and examples</td>
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25 See Bohnenblust (1905), 39-40; O’Neil (1977), 121.
I will not discuss this cluster of parallels in detail\textsuperscript{26}. Apart from the fact that no one has ever seen any reason to attribute \textit{On brotherly love} § 2-3 to any Peripatetic source\textsuperscript{27}, I only stress that Plutarch, who in \textit{On having many friends} used the argument of ‘nature’ as the ground on which the limitation of the number of friends to two ultimately rests, was going to get in trouble with this argument (cf. also n. 20), if it was to be applied to brotherly love. For although there was the happy contingency that the essay \textit{On brotherly love} was dedicated to two brothers, nature sometimes provides for more than two brothers... Hence the furtive correction: “nature from one seed and one source has created two brothers, or three, or more, not for difference, etc.” (478E). Nature, for that matter, would have gotten Plutarch into more trouble: if nature dictates that spreading love means weakening it (G in \textit{On having many friends}), this natural law has to be corrected in “nature’s design for the two or many brothers to cooperate” (G’ in \textit{On brotherly love}).

On the one hand, this example illustrates the flexibility with which Plutarch applies his own rhetorical ‘format’ to different contexts. On the other hand, the question is legitimate as to what degree Plutarch’s appeal to ‘nature’ is consistent and convincing from a philosophical point of view. The strategy of ‘naturalising’ friendship between two people seems to be a purely rhetorical trick. Here, then, we have a philosopher who doesn’t want to discuss such a fundamental notion as ‘nature’, but whose concern it is to bring practical philosophy or, better still, a practicable philosophy in a persuasive way to his audience. Plutarch is not really philosophising, but pleading a cause and offering

\textsuperscript{26} For a thorough analysis, see Van Meirvenne (2002), 392-400.
\textsuperscript{27} Even Brokate (1913), 20 thinks it is very likely that Plutarch composed \textit{On brotherly love} § 1-8 himself.
practical advice. His plea does not rest on logical demonstration but operates through an appeal to the emotions and to common sense\(^{28}\).

### 3. True friendship: Plutarch and Themistius

Plutarch must have realized that his emphasis on ‘having but one friend’ was driving home the plea against having many friends, and that he would ruin his case by rubbing the audience the wrong way (stubbornly confronting them with a paradoxon\(^{29}\)). As a speaker he is clever enough – and as a man he is wise enough – to concede without completely giving up his position: “We do not maintain that our friend should be ‘the only one’, but along with others let there be some ‘child of our eld’ and ‘late-begotten’…” (94A). Plutarch is differentiating among ‘friends’ here. The one friend, who is the true one, has been with us since long ago. The others are fair-weather friends, casually met in the malls, the fitness centre, the hotel, or a bar; they will take advantage of us as long as possible. Plutarch clearly plays on the instinctive fear of ‘strangers’ who are eager to take advantage of us; he also appeals to our feelings of shame in the event that we are taken advantage of\(^{30}\). The naïve confidence in casual acquaintances may very well be “the fashion of the day” (94A), but Plutarch is not insisting on that point. It is not his intention to inveigh against his times, but rather to promote true friendship. Thus ‘the true friend’ is opposed to chance acquaintances, who are associated with ‘friendship for the sake of profit’.

Plutarch then defines true friendship:

But true friendship seeks after three things above all else: virtue as a good thing, intimacy as a pleasant thing, and usefulness as a necessary thing\(^{31}\), for a man ought to use judgement before accepting a friend, and to enjoy being with him and to use him when in need of him, and all these things stand in the way of one’s having many friends; and most in the way is the first (which is the most important) – the approval through judgement (94B).

\(^{28}\) The assessment is inspired by the approach of H.G. Ingenkamp (2000).

\(^{29}\) Lausberg (1990\(^{3}\)), # 64. 3.

\(^{30}\) Cf. Konstan (1998), 292: “Flatterers […], like the hangers-on or parasites who attached themselves to the houses of the well-to-do, […] are a stock character in New Comedy”.

\(^{31}\) In fact, this definition was prepared for already in 93F: “What then is the coin of friendship? It is goodwill and graciousness combined with virtue”.

The definition is, at the same time, a discrete way of instructing the audience (docilem parare) about the topics that will be treated. Indeed, the demonstration will be structured as follows:

1. Virtue as a mark of true friendship opposes one’s having many friends (from §3, 94B σκέπτεσθαι δὴ πρῶτον to §5, 94F ἐν πολλῷ κριθέσαν; about 39 lines in the Loeb edition). The section begins and concludes with the advice to take the necessary time before engaging in a friendship33;

2. Intimacy as a mark of true friendship opposes one’s having many friends (from §5, 94F ἀρὸν κρίναι to §5, 95B παγείσῃ γενέσθαι; about 20 lines in the Loeb edition). It is impossible to be intimate with many friends at the same time;

3. Usefulness as a mark of true friendship opposes one’s having many friends (from §5, 95B τοῦτο δ᾿ εὐθὺς ὑποβάλλει to the end of §7; about 90 lines in the Loeb edition). For practical reasons, one cannot be of service to many friends at the same time.

We expect to get some clarification about the ‘exclusive virtue’ (cf. 1.2 above) in the first part of the demonstration, especially since Plutarch himself calls virtue the most important mark of true friendship. In terms of quantity, however, the topic of ‘virtue’ catches relatively little attention. Moreover, through the shift from ‘virtue’ to ‘judgement before accepting a friend’33, Plutarch’s practical advice is that one has to take the time to make a good (“rightly and surely tried”: 94D) judgement. This is absolutely necessary since “friends are to strip for a general contest with every kind of fortune” (94C), and friends are there to stand by our side in “numerous and great perils” (94CD). Furthermore, if the judgement was wrong, the ‘bad friend’ will cause much discomfort (94D). Notice that Plutarch, again, appeals to feelings of fear. Besides, one might think that this argument would more appropriately be brought up under the heading ‘usefulness of friends’. Anyway, so far we haven’t learned much about the content of the required virtue. But then the more deterrent mood changes into positive advice: “we should seek after those who are worthy of our friendship (τοὺς ἀξίους φιλίας)”, and “of our own motion (αὐτούς) […] embrace those of whom

33 Cf. Aristotle, E.N. VIII.3.8, concerning the perfect friendship: “Such friendships…require time”.

33 The theme of κρίσις is Theophrastean: see On brotherly love §8 in Table 2.
we approve as worthy of our attention and useful to us (τοῖς ἄξιοις σπουδῆς καὶ ὠφελίμοις)\(^{34}\) (94E).

The repetition of the notion ‘like us/worthy of us’ is striking; it is repeated throughout the ‘lecture’: one should reach out to those “worthy to keep up the same participation, that is to say, those who are able, in a like manner, to love and participate” (96D); potential friends have lives which hold to our principles (96E); they should show “agreement in words, counsels, opinions, and feelings” (96F) and “likeness in characters, feelings, language, pursuits, and dispositions” (97A). Plutarch expects his audience to have a deep self-respect: they are to be themselves the touchstone of potential friends. According to him, we should not be “unsparing of our virtue by uniting and intertwining it now with one and now with another” (96D). Apparently Plutarch is talking to an audience he deems capable of making their own decisions and being eager to do so: he appeals to their sense of dignity. The audience Plutarch is talking to consists of free individuals, centres of decision-making who can apply their own criteria: subjects of friendship\(^{35}\). In short, he imagines his audience to be rather adult\(^{36}\).

This doesn’t mean Plutarch is unaware of situations in which the choice is simply not ours: sometimes we are the objects of friendship, or doomed to be ‘friends’. The former is the case when other people offer us their friendship, and then the question arises whether they are friends or flatterers (On friendship and flattery); the latter occurs when nature has placed us in a bond of brotherhood (On brotherly love). The topos of judging friends will thus naturally pop up in those contexts as well\(^{37}\), and it will be formatted in the standard Plutarchan way:

\(^{34}\) In this more positive advice within the section about ‘virtue’ as a mark of true friendship, the interpretation of σπουδῆς as ‘attention’ is somewhat weak; one might prefer ‘respect’.

\(^{35}\) This may explain the somewhat offensive metaphor from commerce (93E): an adult person doesn’t waste his money, let alone ‘the coin of friendship’.


\(^{37}\) There will, of course, be different accents. On friendship and flattery is addressed to a ‘person in high station’, and friendship there has some political implications, largely absent from On having many friends. For political aspects of friendship, see, e.g., Precepts of Statecraft § 13 and L. Van der Stockt (2002); Dio of Prusa, Third oration on kingship and D. Konstan (1997).
On Friendship and Flattery

§ 2a, 49C-E

- A. proverbial bushel of salt
- B. leisure-time friends are no real friends
- C. comparison: mass of friends//mass of flies
- D. the tripartite nature of friendship
- E. examine flatterers before they can harm
- F. comparison: friend//coin
- G. harm caused by a false friend; comparison with deadly drugs
- H. quotation from tragedy (TrGF I, 43 fr. 6)

On having many Friends

§ 3 (94B-D) and § 7 (96C)

- A. proverbial bushel of salt
- B. leisure-time friends are no real friends
- C. comparison: mass of friends//mass of flies
- D. the tripartite nature of friendship
- E. Theophrastus’ maxim on judging friends
- F. comparison: friend//false coin
- G. pain and injury caused by a false friend; comparison with harmful food
- H. 96C: quotation from tragedy (TrGF I, 43 fr. 6)

On brotherly love

§ 8 (481F-482C)

- A. proverbial bushel of salt
- B. attitude of/toward leisure-time friends contrasted with that of/toward brothers (482A and 482B)

Be that as it may, we still regret Plutarch’s silence about the nature of the ‘virtue’ displayed by the one who decides to make someone a friend and required from the one who is to become one’s friend. Are we to write virtue here with a capital V? Should the friend be the embodiment of a Platonic Idea? The fact that Plutarch doesn’t elaborate on this matter is inexplicable unless we assume that he was pretty sure his audience knew what he meant. In other words, Plutarch is appealing to the ‘ideology of a friend’s virtue’, the prevailing set of opinions and behaviours concerning virtue and philia in his circle.

To know more detail about this ideology, we can turn to another famous ‘popular philosopher’ – and he explicitly claims to be just that! – viz. Themistius. Some two hundred years after Plutarch, he discoursed on friendship, possibly addressing an emperor (and thus actualizing Plutarch’s ideal of the philosopher at the service of the
princeps)\(^38\). In *Or. XXII (On Friendship)*, 267\(a\)-271\(b\), he offers a very concrete checklist that defines true friendship\(^39\). According to him, the following are the ‘tracks of our prey’:

1. The person put to the test must be ‘very affectionate and very loving of those close to him’, for ‘this is a quality that contributes to the forming of attachments’. So how does that person treat his father, mother, brother, wife?

   This sounds very modern: the family as the school for developing social skills, and, conversely, unsocial behaviour originating from unsound familial relations... Plutarch treated familial love in separate essays like *De fraterno amore*, *De amore prolis*, *Coniugalia praecipe*. One will look in vain for this topic in *De am. mult.*, except for the hint at parental love in 93\(F\)-94\(A\). Perhaps also his treatment of ‘intimacy’ (section 2, 94\(F\)-95\(B\)) comes close to this topic; but, as an argument against multiple friendships, it is disappointingly weak: it repeats with abundant redundancy the ‘enjoyment of friendship’, ‘the sweetness of its association and daily commerce’, ‘its continual association and mutual acts of kindness’, its ‘mutual goodwill’, only to state, without any demonstration, that multiple friendships create ‘disunion, separation, and divergence’. As such, this section does not teach, it makes one dream. Anyway, the capability of reciprocal loving is mentioned (also in the transition to the last part of the text: τοῖς ὁμοίως φιλεῖν καὶ κοινωνεῖν δυναμένοις [96\(D\)]) as the mark of a friend, but not made operational in a procedure of testing potential friends.

2. “Does he utterly lack a sense of gratitude”? “Just examine how people are inclined. See if they will give back as much as they can”.

   Gratitude, or the exchange of services rendered, was considered an integral part of friendship in antiquity\(^40\), and Plutarch voices the common opinion on the utility of friendship. He reckons graciousness among the characteristics of true friendship (93\(F\), 94\(B\)); he also touches upon this subject in the large section 95\(B\)-96\(D\), but in order to argue against multiple friendships: the exchange of services among many friends is impossible for the one who engages in multiple friendships. Again, Plutarch treats this topic, graciousness as the mark of a true friend,

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\(^38\) For Themistius’ dedicatee, see Penella (1999), 18 n. 65 and 66; the quote is from his translation.

\(^39\) Themistius’ *Or. XXII* displays many striking reminiscences of Plutarch’s essays on friendship. A closer look at this intertextual play would be worthwhile. For Plutarch in Themistius, see also P. Volpe Cacciatore (2004) and (2005).

\(^40\) See Konstan (1998).
from the point of view of his audience as subjects of friendship: *their* deficiencies in rendering service can cause *them* great difficulties.

3. Can he forgo pleasures and endure hardships?

The capability of enduring hardships *on behalf of a friend* is alluded to in 94CD and 95E. But again, this is rather a request from the subjects of friendship, viz. of Plutarch’s audience, and it is in itself, again, an argument against multiple friendships.

4. Is he jealous, stingy, a lover of fame, addicted to being first, or easily irritated?

All these character traits, or rather vices, are, of course, opposed to the (apparently moral) virtue of the true friend. Plutarch hints at these deficiencies of the ‘many friends’ only indirectly: they do not have “our character, our opinions, our lives, our principles” (96EF). As we have seen, Plutarch flatters his audience by assuming that they are the touchstone, possessing ‘virtue’ (*capatatio benevolentiae ab auditorum persona*). Yet, at the same time, Plutarch’s omission to elaborate on moral qualities concerning friendship was unnecessary if his audience was well aware of his moral teaching (*On envy and hate, On the control of anger, On love of wealth*, etc.).

5. Is he “excessively given to the pursuit of something that is not unconditionally good for him (τῶν οὐ πάνυ τι χρηστῶν): […] dice-playing (κυβείαν), checkers, or playing the lyre or the flute”? “If all a man’s desires […] incline to one such pursuit, then his friendships cannot be strong enough to nurture the better things (τἀμείνω)”.

As is clear by now, Plutarch is not keen on listing this kind of concrete criteria for testing potential friends. The mention of gambling (συγκυβεύσαντες) in 94A is part of an altogether different argument. But the exordium of Plutarch’s *Life of Pericles* shows that he would certainly agree with Themistius in playing down the value of artistic activities such as ‘playing the lyre or the flute’ vis-à-vis the effectuation of moral virtue: “Therefore it was a fine remark of Antisthenes, when he heard that Ismenias was an excellent piper: ‘But he’s a worthless man,’ said he, ‘otherwise he wouldn’t be so good a piper.’ And so Philip once said to his son, who, as the wine went round, plucked the strings charmingly and skilfully, ‘Are you not ashamed to pluck the strings so well?’ […] Labour with one’s own hands on lowly tasks gives witness, in the toil thus expended on useless things (ἐν τοῖς ἀχρήστοις), to one’s indifference to higher things (εἰς τὰ καλά)” (*Per. 1.4-2.1*).

Themistius’ next observation⁴¹, which is a kind of interim conclusion, is that it will not be easy to find a man of such purity, and that

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⁴¹ Lausberg (1990), # 274.
⁴² Penella (1999), 94 n. 16 calls it a “digressionary observation”.
“you must be content if even one such person should pass the test. Clearly, a man who knows how to select true friends will not have many friends (πολύφιλος), will not have countless friends”. This statement makes a perfect transition to the following criterion.

6. “Next, it is essential that your potential friend, while not himself resting content with [too] few friends, also avoid too many”. Much like Plutarch in the third section of his demonstration, Themistius then points to the inconveniences created by divergent fortunes and expectations. Themistius’ nuanced criterion “while not himself resting content with [too] few friends, also avoid too many” clearly marks the exclamation “you must be content if even one such person should pass the test” (see sub 4) as a rhetorical exaggeration. For Plutarch, even if he adds some nuance, the alternative for ‘having many friends’ is not ‘having a few friends’, but rather ‘having one true friend’. In this respect, there is more rhetorical bias in Plutarch’s plea than in Themistius’ checklist.

7. Are the ‘small defects in his soul’ different from our own and, as it were, complementary (“a person who is insensible to maltreatment will fit well with someone who is insulting . . .”)?

Themistius at least allows for small defects in both friends, and gives advice according to the principle of compensation. On the one hand, Plutarch couldn’t possibly give such advice: it would have implied the presence of ‘small defects’ in the subjects of friendship he was talking to, and that would have gone counter to his tactics of playing on the common, virtuous disposition of himself and his audience. On the other hand, Themistius’ advice touches on the theme of ‘ὁμοιότης’, and again, as will become clear, Plutarch’s picture of the ideal friendship is far more demanding than Themistius’ pragmatic checklist.

To sum up: Plutarch and Themistius share some specific viewpoints on the nature of true friendship; these topics are, if not commonsensical, then at least common Greek Aristotelian subjects. They differ mainly in the organisation of the topics within their proper discourse. Themistius offers a stern and pragmatic checklist, developing a procedure to test a potential friend. He invites his audience to scrutinise that potential friend’s character and behaviour to see if he qualifies as a friend. Plutarch’s discourse, however, starts from a formal definition of friendship which includes several of Themistius’ topics, but it has them function within the systematic strategy of opposing multiple friendships: they are contraindications for having many friends. Moreover,

43 In the case of brotherly love, however, he considers the question of how to deal with ‘a bad brother’ (De frat. am. §8).
the potential friend should be tested not by going through a checklist, but by holding the potential friend up against one’s own ‘virtue’. The tacit assumption is that “we, the speaker and the audience, are the decent people, aren’t we?” This might explain Plutarch’s reticence to elaborate on the content of that decency. His silence should most likely not be attributed to any intentional avoidance of flattering his audience by enumerating various aspects of its decency. Plutarch is voicing an uncritical and at the same time performative conviction.

4. Likeness and friendship: in search of the Doppelgänger

The transition to the last two chapters of Plutarch’s text is smooth and nothing but logical: if ‘we’ are the ultimate touchstone, friends can only be those persons who are our equals. As Plutarch puts it, “friendship comes into being through likeness (διʾ ὁμοιότητος)” This likeness should be complete: “but in our friendship’s consonance and harmony there must be no element unlike, uneven, or unequal, but all must be alike to engender agreement in words, counsels, opinions, and feelings” (96EF). It follows that no one can “assimilate and accommodate himself to many persons” (96F) unless he behaves like the octopus and testifies to possessing no “firmly founded character of his own” (97A), for “the possession of a multitude of friends will necessarily have, as its underlying basis, a soul that is very impressionable, versatile, pliant, and readily changeable” (97B).

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44 This is not quite what Aristotle meant when he said (E.N. VIII.3.6): ταλιὰ δ᾿ ἐστὶν ἡ τῶν ἀγαθῶν φιλία καὶ κατ᾿ ἀρετὴν ὁμοίων. His point is that, among the three kinds of friendship, the one between the good is the perfect one.

45 Plutarch dealt with this matter in the same way in his essay On friendship and flattery:

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<tr>
<th>On friendship and flattery</th>
<th>On having many friends § 8-9</th>
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<tr>
<td>§ 5 and 6-8 (51BC and 51E-52F)</td>
<td>(96D-97B)</td>
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<tr>
<td>A. “character likeness is the beginning of friendship”</td>
<td>A. “character likeness is the beginning of friendship”</td>
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<td>B. the flatterer has no one, fixed, abiding place of character</td>
<td>D. image of the octopus</td>
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<td>C. 5 scenes of imitative behaviour</td>
<td>B. the flatterer has no one, fixed, abiding place of character</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. image of the octopus</td>
<td>C. 6 scenes of imitative behaviour</td>
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So far, the audience might have the impression that Plutarch is implicitly urging them to remain faithful to their own stable character, and thus to understand that such a stable character is incompatible with craving many friends. But, somewhat surprisingly, Plutarch’s conclusion has some bearing on the potential friend out there: since there are not many stable characters that are at the same time ‘like us’ in all aspects, “for this reason a steadfast friend is something rare and hard to find” (97B). The required ὁμοιότης, then, is a characteristic of the potential friend. Set apart from the foregoing three characteristics of true friendship, it is an additional requirement that strengthens the tendency to idealise friendship and that, as “the greatest obstacle of all to having a multitude of friends” (96D), makes it so ‘exclusive’. Whereas Themistius allowed for at least some unevenness, viz. concerning the minor flaws in the character of friends, Plutarch is quite formal: “And it must be as if one soul were apportioned among several bodies” (96F).

Starting with the thesis that “friendship comes into being through likeness”, Plutarch reaches his conclusion that “a steadfast friend is rare” only by meandering through five comparisons (with brute beasts, music, the octopus, the mythological Proteus, a concept from natural philosophy), two rhetorical questions, and a poetic quotation. This is not to say that there is no logic in his discourse, but that the alternation of illustration and apodictic statement is a highly rhetorical way of persuading his audience. An essential part of this rhetorical tactic is to naturalise the idea of complete likeness and total harmony through the comparisons with natural phenomena. And perhaps the effect of this rhetoric is not only the conviction that the true friend is rare, but also that he exists altogether. There can be only one out there who will make a perfect fit: he will be our soul mate. And isn’t the suggestion also that this ideal friend is the one who seems to know all about it, who speaks so authentically about it, who stands in front of his audience?

5. Concluding observations. Plutarch and Maximus

Plutarch has offered a sketch of the ideal friendship. In contrast with polyphilia, true friendship meets the demands of decency, pleasure,
and usefulness together. This ideal friendship is ‘exclusive’ in two respects:

a. Partial actualizations of the unique mix are not regarded as ‘friendship’. Relationships that actualize only one of the ingredients cannot be labelled ‘friendships’: instead they would be (lascivious) lust, or parasitism, or end in stern and unsocial behaviour. Nor do ‘friendly’ relations that actualize the mix only partially find favour in the eyes of Plutarch: his discourse is about that true friend as opposed to ‘the others’ (94A: his phrasing enables him to not even use the word ‘friends’ for these others).

b. We can have but one true friend. Not only is it impossible to have many friends, but the requirement of ‘likeness and (thus of) constancy of character’ tends to limit the number of friends to ‘one’.

Consequently, ‘true friendship’ is rare. Plutarch’s discourse is in keeping with the popular high esteem for true friendship as well as with the despair at ever having a true friend. The praise of true friendship continuously presupposes that it is an achievable goal, and Plutarch tacitly assumes that his audience has all the necessary potential for engaging in authentic friendships. If his target audience consisted of (young) adults, this positive approach was the only justifiable, i.e., educationally responsible, one. His basic caveat is not to be ‘unspiring of our virtue’, and this warning was most pertinent inasmuch as Aristotle’s observation (E.N. VIII.3.5) was pertinent: “Hence they [viz. the young] both form friendships and drop them quickly, since their affections are with what gives them pleasure, and the tastes of youth change quickly”.

Inasmuch, however, as the ideal friendship is actually rare and difficult to acquire, another Siren was lurking: the melancholic lament on ‘degeneration’, on the moral incapacity of contemporary humanity to achieve this high goal. Apart from casual rhetorical generalizations (‘our days’ behaving stupidly [94A]), Plutarch is not giving in to this temptation. By way of contrast, one may read Maximus of Tyre on the subject of ‘Friendship and Virtue’ (Or. XXXV). Maximus lived in the second century AD, and was...a popular philosopher. It has been

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47 For an example, see Cato in Precepts of statecraft 808EF.
48 Aristotle (E.N. VIII.3.8) says that perfect friendships are rare “because such men [viz. good men] are rare”. Plutarch links the scarcity of true friendship to the scarcity of ‘people like us’. The idea is basically the same, inasmuch as the ‘people like us’ are people who equal our virtue. But for Plutarch the likeness extends to more than simply ethical qualities.
suggested\textsuperscript{49} that his \textit{Philosophical Oration}s were addressed to young adults who were about to crown their education with the pearl of philosophy. Reading his \textit{Or.} XXXV, however, one might fear he threatened to turn his audience into a bunch of despairing pessimists. Maximus’ diagnosis of earlier and contemporary morality is flatly hypochondric:

But as matters now stand, in a single herd under the guidance of a single shepherd, you can see many conflicts and disputes as they butt and bite each other, and only a few flickerings gathered laboriously together to make a small sum of friends (§2),

and

The reason for this [sc. universally observable misguided human pursuits] is a mistrust of friendship, and a lust for gain, and a fear of want, and evil habits, and a desire for pleasure, by all of which friendship is hounded and buried and sunk, barely preserving itself in weak and feeble traces (§3),

and

After that [sc. after Harmodius and Aristogeiton] there was no friendship in Attica; all was diseased and rotten and treacherous and corroded, full of envy and anger and boorishness and greed and ambition. If you move on to the rest of Greece, you will find an abundance of sombre tales… (§4-5).

To be sure, virtue is a mark of friendship for Maximus as well. But his diagnosis of universal depravity, and especially of greed (and its instrument: money), makes friendship actually an unattainable goal. It seems indeed altogether unrealistic to promote the abolition of money and the return to a stage “before the invention of metallurgy and coinage”\textsuperscript{50}. This kind of primitivism is foreign to Plutarch, whose plea, even if it is also \textit{against} something, sounds at the same time far more positive and optimistic. Maximus’ (‘populist’?) message tends to confirm cynical distrust of humankind altogether; help must come \textit{from outside}, from philosophy: “let us call on Philosophy to aid us! Let her come, let her make peace, let her proclaim it” (§8). I would prefer Plutarch as a teacher. Even if his rhetoric does not invite a nuanced

\textsuperscript{49} Trapp (1997), xx-xxii; the quote is from his translation.

\textsuperscript{50} Trapp (1997), 227 n. 14.
critique of the philosophical tenets implied, it communicates a more balanced, commonsensical wisdom. Moreover, the rhetorical tactic of appealing to the virtue within the audience is in keeping with Plutarch’s educational strategy\(^{51}\) of making the pupil himself responsible for his own development.

\(^{51}\) For Plutarch’s educational methods, see Roskam (2004).