

Plutarch's Socrates

by Christopher Pelling

'Socrates' is a name to conjure with. Few figures of classical Athens – perhaps only Pericles – immediately carry such resonance: that is true now, and it was true in Plutarch's time as well. Today the resonance might first be of 'the philosopher' *par excellence*, one who would naturally take his place in any all-time philosophical first eleven, just as he did for Monty Python (and indeed he alone gets three lines rather than one or two in the Python philosophers' song); secondly, of a particular philosophical approach, the 'Socratic method', of oral question and answer; and, thirdly, of the man who paid the ultimate price for such uncomfortable questioning and who bore that unjust death with exemplary serenity. Some might also recollect that he left no writings; that, however, normally goes with the further thought that he did not need to, and thanks to his disciples he gained a posthumous following and exercised an influence denied to most, perhaps to all, who wielded a more active pen. But there is little in the resonance today to suggest any particular doctrine. Think Kant, and think categorical imperative; think Aristotle, think golden mean; think Nietzsche, think superman; think Plato, think forms; think Descartes, think *cogito*. But think Socrates, and it is more likely to be argumentativeness than any particular argument that comes even to the educated mind; more likely baldness than any creed.

Things were different, but not too different, for Plutarch and his readers. Most of this paper will be concerned with two of Plutarch's most extended treatments of Socrates, one in the *Lives* (*Alcibiades*) and one in the *Moralia* (*On the Daimonion of Socrates*); but it will be useful first to survey Plutarch's many more fleeting references to the man, and see what associations 'Socrates' had for Plutarch and, presumably, for his readers. The path here is made much easier by Jackson Hershbell's excellent treatment of this subject in 1988, and by Klaus Döring's more general survey

of the surge of interest in Socrates during the early principate.¹ If I revisit the topic, that is because few figures I know manage to be both so Plutarchan and so Socratic as John Dillon, whom I am delighted to honour in this volume.

For Plutarch too Socrates was a name like few other names. He and his circle even celebrated Socrates' birthday, and then, a day later, Plato's (*Table Talk* 717b).² But for Plutarch too and his contemporaries there seem to be few doctrines that would readily be associated with Socrates: perhaps the claim to know nothing, but even that comes up more rarely than we might expect,³ and with a distinctly ethical tinge ('Socrates would interrogate the young gently, as one who had not escaped from ignorance himself, but who thought he needed to join them in the concern for virtue and the search for truth', *How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 72a). Even the relation of virtue and knowledge is not mentioned. Instead it is rather stray maxims that we find: for instance – a particular favourite, and one that is cited three times – the undesirability of foods that entice you to eat when not hungry or drinks that make you drink when not thirsty (*How to keep one's Health* 124d, *Talkativeness* 513c–d, *Inquisitiveness* 521f, *Table Talk* 661f; the source here is *Xen. Mem.* 1.3.6); but that is an ascetic saying rather than an ascetic creed.⁴ On the rare occasions when a particular doctrine is mentioned, this is linked very closely with the method that goes with it: thus at *Platonic Questions* 1000d–e the theory of *anamnesis* is mentioned, 'and

¹ Hershbell (1988); Döring (1979).

² A coincidence that makes Plutarch reflect on the way nature managed so close a connection of the two, a link that we shall often see in the way Plutarch treats Socrates: apart from the instances discussed in the text, notice also phrases such as 'people like Socrates and Plato' (*On cleverness of animals* 962b), in that case making them examples of virtue and wisdom, or '... showing that great natures are melancholic, like those of Socrates and Plato and Heracles' (*Lys.* 2.3). Cf. Hershbell (1988), 367–8.

³ Notice, for instance, that Socratic *eironeia* is not associated particularly with this doctrine: when the word is used of Socrates it normally refers to particular jests and pleasantries, and 'Plutarch does not mention a form of εἰρωνεία that would be specific for Socrates or for the Socratic brand of philosophy' (Opsomer (1998), 124, cf. (2000), 323–6).

⁴ And one, perhaps, whose main point is to illuminate Socrates' ascetic character: it links with the recurrent interest in his poverty (*Arist.* 1.9, *Progress in Virtue* 84f, *Desire for Wealth* 527b and e). It is of a piece with 'bad men live in order to eat and drink, good men eat and drink in order to live' (*How a young man should listen to the poets* 21e).

that is why Socrates did not teach anything, but led young people into *aporiai* as if they were birthpangs, and stirred up and stimulated and teased out their innate ideas; and he called this his art of midwifery, not something that imported from elsewhere (as others claimed to do) good sense into those he met, but showing that they had something of their own inside them that was incomplete and unstable and needed someone to nurture and strengthen it'. *Anamnesis*, yes – but the emphasis still falls on what Socrates did, and in particular what he did for others.

Partly, of course, that is because it is so hard to disentangle Socrates' own philosophy from the versions of it which are peddled by Plato. That is a difficulty that we can tell from Plutarch's language that he sensed, even if he did not articulate it. For of course Plutarch realised that Plato's dialogues cannot be taken as accurate transcriptions of Socratic conversations (just as he realised that Thucydides' speeches cannot be taken as literally the words of the speakers⁵): at times, especially when particular points or arguments are what matters, he specifies (for instance) the 'many grandiose claims that Plato attributes to Socrates in *Theaetetus*' (*Platonic Questions* 999c–d, cf. *C.mai.* 7.1). But there are also times when he, apparently casually, has phrases like 'as Socrates says...' (e.g. *On Cleverness in Animals* 975b, cf. *On the Face in the Moon* 934f) or 'as Alcibiades joked at Socrates' expense', meaning 'Plato's Socrates' and 'Alcibiades' (*Table Talk* 632b, cf. 645f, 707a–b, 710c–d). These variations are not as casual as they seem. Such references usually refer to sayings that reveal things about the historical Socrates' character, how he lived and what he was, how he argued rather than what he argued: thus 'we often ask people questions not because we want to know the answers, but because we want to bring them into a friendly conversation, as Socrates did with Theaetetus and Charmides' (*Talkativeness* 512b).⁶ That 'how he lived' can extend to the sort

⁵ Stadter (1973), who also shows that Plutarch still draws on those Thucydidean speeches as offering material that characterises their speakers. In Socrates' case, Aelius Aristides is more dismissive of any historical basis at all: 'Doesn't everyone know that "Socrates" and "Callicles" and "Gorgias" and "Polus" – all these are Plato, manipulating the words just as he chooses?', *Against Plato on behalf of the Four* p. 298 J.

⁶ The opening of *On having many Friends* (93b) is a more elaborate example: 'Socrates once asked Meno...', and a summary of *Meno* 71d–72a follows. The point is that Socrates reproved Meno for giving a host of examples rather than a single

of language he adopted: when Plutarch cites Socrates' description of himself as a 'fellow-slave of the swans and priest of the same god', it is hard to forget the context in which he said it, that swan-song of the *Phaedo* (85b);⁷ but if so it is the manner and the view of himself that one recalls rather than the particular argument that it introduces. When it is the philosophical argument that matters, it is 'Plato' rather than 'Socrates' that Plutarch quotes,⁸ or at least 'as Socrates says in Plato...' (*How a young man should listen to the Poets* 17e, cf. *Isis and Osiris* 374c). The procedure is not random: we could even say it implies a reading of Plato's intentions, discriminating those passages where Plato's own concern was to characterise Socrates as an (exemplary) historical figure.⁹

What Socrates was, how Socrates lived: these are the typical concerns of Plutarch as well, and in particular Socrates as the embodiment of the *virtuous* life. It is no coincidence that passing references to Socrates are especially frequent in pairs like *Aristides–Cato maior* where virtue is particularly an issue, and in the 'popular philosophy' works such as *Controlling Anger* and

definition of 'virtue': that is used as analogy for being concerned with *poluphilia* before understanding whether one has a single *philia* firmly in one's grasp. It is the right way to analyse rather than the particular analysis that is in point.

⁷ *On Cleverness in Animals* 975b. This interest in how Socrates talked and argued may also explain why the myth in *Phaedo* is quoted as coming from 'Socrates of old' rather than Plato, *On the Face in the Moon* 934f: in context, the substance rather than the expression is what is in mind, but the mode of expression is still so striking that Plutarch could have felt it to characterise the historical Socrates.

⁸ Examples are too numerous to quote in full, but it is symptomatic that every one of the Plato citations quoted at length in John Dillon's classic Plutarch chapter (Dillon (1977), 184–230) is given by Plutarch as from 'Plato': *God's slowness to punish* 550d–f, *On Moral Virtue* 441e, *Isis and Osiris* 372c, *Table Talk* 740b–d, *Decline of the Oracles* 416e–f, 421f–2a, 435e–6a, *Against Colotes* 1115d. Several of those relate to passages which in Plato's original are attributed to Socrates. Of course, 'Plato' is often quoted too for striking phrases which Plato puts in Socrates' mouth, e.g. *Rom.* 30(1).1 citing *Phaedo* 68d, *Numa* 8.2 citing *Rpb.* 2.370c, and many others.

⁹ *Per.* 13.7 is an interesting case: 'the long wall, which Socrates says he heard himself Pericles proposing...'. The reference is to *Gorgias* 455e: not exactly an item of Socrates' own lifestyle, but still a point about Socrates' experience rather than any philosophical argument or position. Plato would presumably not have put in that detail unless it were literally true – or so, at least, Plutarch might have reasoned. Plutarch seems to be more straightforwardly ready to speak of what 'Socrates' said or did when it is Xenophon's Socrates that is in point: e.g. *Pythian Oracles* 401c, *Talkativeness* 513c, *Inquisitiveness* 521f, *Table Talk* 632b and e, 661f, 711e, 713c. Did he take that work as a more straightforward depiction of the historical Socrates?

Talkativeness. This is the man of integrity, a 'champion of truth for all his life' (*How a young man should listen to the Poets* 16c); this is the man of mild disposition, *praotes* (especially when his wife is in point, *C.mai.* 20.3, *How to gain Profit from one's Enemies* 90d, *Controlling Anger* 461d); this is the man who has trained himself to extraordinary self-control (*Talkativeness* 512f). It is no surprise that one of the dialogues that figures most frequently in Plutarch's citations is the *Gorgias*, with its passionate concern with 'how to live', its plea to follow the path of virtue rather than of shallow rhetoric, and its contrast of that life with the values espoused and influence exercised by the great democratic leaders, Pericles, Miltiades, Themistocles, and Cimon. One indeed of the central points about Plutarch's virtuous Socrates is that he lived up to his own standards, and did not abandon them even under the pressure of imminent execution: once again, it is that exemplary integrity, rather than any closer analysis of the principles themselves, that commands interest and admiration.

That is even reflected in the one essay where Plutarch comes closest to examining Socrates' distinctive philosophy, the *Against Colotes*, where Socrates takes his place in the series of great thinkers – Democritus, Empedocles, Parmenides, Plato, Socrates, Stilpo, Arcesilaus – whose philosophy Plutarch vindicates against the derision of the Epicurean Colotes. Or, in fact, not quite 'his place', as he is moved to follow Plato rather than precede him as he did in history and presumably in Colotes' own book. Plutarch has good reasons for this,¹⁰ allowing 'Plato' to continue the interest in ontology from earlier thinkers and 'Socrates' to move the emphasis to the questions of believing and saying true things about the world, themes that are then continued with Stilpo and the Cyrenaics: in Epicurean terms, this ordering helps the transition from 'physics' to 'canonics'. If that is right, this is indeed a case where particular tenets of Socrates' thought, the confession of ignorance and the investigation of himself, are in the foreground.¹¹ Yet the discussion of Socrates himself is

¹⁰ Kechagia elaborates this point in her important dissertation, (2005), 138–51. Cf. Opsomer (1998), 102; Warren (2002), 338–9.

¹¹ Vander Waerdt (1989), 253–9 duly sees Socratic scepticism as the emphasis of the Socrates section in *Against Colotes*, and (he infers) also of Colotes' original; cf.

couched in a tone of indignation,¹² and addresses it in ways that focus on the aspersions that Plutarch sees Colotes as casting on Socrates' *moral* pre-eminence. How can Colotes, of all people, accuse the story of Chaerephon's oracle of 'vulgarity'? How can he presume to suggest that Socrates was hypocritical in continuing to live on the assumption that perceptions were reliable? (The whole work is concerned with similar issues of consistency between philosophers' views and the needs of everyday life, but this is where both Colotes' attack and Plutarch's defence are phrased with particular stridency.¹³) And how dare Colotes deride the investigation of one's own self and nature, basic as this is to the quest for any true knowledge (*Against Colotes* 1116e–1119c)? It is only with the shift to the later philosophers that the harder-edged epistemological arguments about predication and perception are given.

'How Socrates lived' – and, of course, how he died: those two topics are forever inextricably linked: they are in the *Against Colotes*, where Socrates' death goes with all his earlier life as proof against any suggestion of hypocrisy (1117e, cited below p. 114), and also features in the essay's final impassioned sermon against political quietism in life (1126b); they are in *Tranquillity of Mind*, where Socrates' demeanour in prison and at the trial capture the man's serenity, and show us all how to live as well as die (466e, 475e)¹⁴; they are in *Should an old man take part in*

Einarson–de Lacy (1967), 156–7, Hershbell (1988), 369–72, Warren (2002). Opsomer (1998), esp. 84–105, argues more fundamentally that Colotes' attacks on Socrates were integrally linked with his polemic against the New Academy: Plutarch's defence will be positing a similar continuity of thought between Socrates and his successors (and we do know that he wrote *On the Thesis that the Platonic Academy is a single Entity*, Lampr. cat. 63: cf. Dillon (1988), 359–61, 364).

¹² Cf. Kechagia (2005), 237, arguing that Plutarch's hostility to the Epicureans is clearest in the way he treats the Socrates oracle (1116e–1117c) and the argument against Stilpo (1119d–1120a); '[i]n these cases Plutarch's counter-attack is philosophically less interesting than the argumentation in the other sections of the *Adversus Colotem*, but more intense and polemical in tone'. Her own view is that this is because the Epicurean attitude towards religion is in point.

¹³ Opsomer (1998), 102 comments that '[e]specially the epithets with which Colotes tries to damage Socrates' reputation are singularly harsh, Socrates being called a bragger and a sophist'; Opsomer goes on to discuss the techniques whereby Plutarch turns these charges back on Colotes himself.

¹⁴ Cf. also *Is vice enough to make one miserable?* 499b and *On Exile* 607f. The themes doubtless recurred in Plutarch's two lost works *On the Trial of Socrates* and *In*

Politics?, where the manner of Socrates' death is the natural continuation of the way he conducted his life, 'the first man to show that one's life in every part, in simply every experience and action, welcomes philosophy' (796d–e); they were for Seneca, Epictetus, Dio of Prusa, and Lucian;¹⁵ they were already in Plato's *Gorgias*, where both Callicles and Socrates himself have presentiments of the dangers that Socrates' relentless pursuit of virtue may bring (486a–b, 521e–22e). And, again as already in the *Gorgias*, that trial and death become crucial benchmarks for Plutarch of the contrast of Socrates with his accusers, and more generally of the corrupt and immoral nature of Athenian public life.¹⁶

That even comes out in the fine, piquant passage in *The Fortune or Virtue of Alexander the Great*, where the influence of Plato and Socrates is played against that of Alexander (1.328d–e). There the drift, most unusually in Plutarch, is to play the philosophers' influence down in order to elevate that of Alexander, but the way it is put is still significant. 'Socrates introduced strange supernatural beings (*daimonia*), and paid the penalty for it to the Athenian sycophants: thanks to Alexander, Bactra and the Caucasus came to worship the gods of Greece. Plato wrote one *Republic*, and persuaded no-one to adopt it because it was so unattractive: Alexander founded over seventy cities among the barbarians ... And few of us read Plato's *Laws*, but tens of thousands have used the laws established by

Defence of Socrates (Lamprias catalogue nrs. 189–90) – how else would one defend Socrates than by talking about his life? – but nothing is known of these.

¹⁵ Cf. Döring (1979), 26–31 on Seneca and 48–55 on Epictetus; also such passages as Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 4.46–7, 6.21; Aelius Aristides, *Against Plato on behalf of Rhetoric* p. 83 J., Dio 33.9, 43.9, 15, 47.7, 64.18, Lucian *Don't Believe Slander!* 29, *Zeus exposed* 16, *Coming back to life* 10, *Peregrinus' death* 12, 37, *Runaways* 3 and, with a sardonic view of how Socrates might have been a bit less serene when he got to the underworld, *Dialogues of the Dead* 4.1. Many of those passages add the thought of how badly this reflects on Athenian public life.

¹⁶ Usually, of course, it tells to the extreme discredit of the Athenian public: cf. *Stoic Contradictions* 1051c, where the 'condemnation of Socrates' is listed along with the burning of Pythagoras and the torture and executions of Zeno and Antiphon as extreme examples of 'the accidents that happen to fine and upright men': the point is that these are test-cases of divine justice and philanthropy, evidently because of the contrast of the just sufferers and the unjust persecutors. Rarely, though, it can be used to the Athenians' credit: at least they came later to hate and shun those responsible for his death (*Envy and Hatred*, 537f).

Alexander...'. So the reason for Socrates' fate, even on this rare occasion when it is figured as failure, is put down to the 'Athenian sycophants', and it is a point about Athens more than about himself. In Plato's case, it is more his own fault, for his *Republic* is too unattractive and his *Laws* too unreadable.

Central, of course, to the injustice of the trial is the unfairness of the charges: and Plutarch tends to fasten particularly on that of 'corruption of the young' – no surprise, perhaps, in a writer so engaged in issues of education and *paideia*, though it is a little more surprising that the charge of impiety remains so out of Plutarch's focus.¹⁷ 'How he talked' and 'how he argued' is, for Socrates of all people, inseparable from how he lived (*How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 70e–f, *Talkativeness* 512b, *Should an old man take part in Politics?* 796d): and 'how he talked' is also inseparable from what he did for others, using his interrogatory technique as a sort of 'purifying medicine' to rid his interlocutors of error and pretension (*Platonic Questions* 999d–f, 1000d–e). Nothing could be farther from the charge of corruption that was levelled against him. If this is a man who was not easy to read and understand – more on that in a moment – it was still unforgivable to get him as wrong as that.

In most of the fleeting remarks on Socrates the dominant tone is therefore one of simple indignation. Sometimes, though, there are more specific hallmarks of that Socratic manner that his enemies regarded as so corrupting and that his followers, Plutarch included, found so inspiring. The *Symposium* here becomes a crucial text, especially on that issue of how intellectual conversation should be managed. So many of the *Quaestiones Convivales* are concerned precisely about how such a 'convivial inquiry' ought to proceed, and Socrates duly becomes central to several, especially 2.1 (629e–634f) and the sequence 7.6–8

¹⁷ Though it is mentioned in the passage we have just seen in *On Alexander's fortune or virtue* 1.328d. More typical and telling is *Nic.* 23.4. Plutarch's point there concerns superstition, the way that people were reluctant to accept the physical explanation of eclipses offered by Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Socrates, until Plato explained convincingly that such explanations could co-exist with a divine aspect: even there, Plutarch phrases it as '... and Socrates was killed for his philosophy', and the charge of impiety is not made explicit. The charge of impiety is recalled more often by others, e.g. Dio 37.32 and 66.26, Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 7.11 and 8.7, Aelius Aristides, *Against Plato on behalf of the Four* p. 250 J.

(706f–713f). And from time to time, very understandably, there are hints of *eros* as another of those Socratic hallmarks, at least as a keen Socratic interest (*Pythian Oracles* 406a, *Platonic Questions* 1000d–e).¹⁸ Normally, it is true, Plutarch avoids any suggestion of the physical in Socrates' dealings with young men: versed as he was in the *Symposium*, he knew that story of Alcibiades throwing off his clothes, climbing into bed with Socrates, and getting up the next morning without anything having happened, 'just as if I had been sleeping with my father or my elder brother' (*Symp.* 217d–9d). Not all readers of Plutarch's era were so ready to believe it: in Lucian's *Elysium* there is open sex with both men and women, with the exception of Socrates who protests his lack of interest in young men – but no-one believes him (*True History* 2.19, cf. *Luc. Symposium* 39, *Lives for Sale* 15–6). But in Plutarch one notices that the one reference to Socrates in the *Amatorius* concerns the passion for Alcibiades of Anytus, not of Socrates, and how Alcibiades roisteringly robbed Anytus of half of the goblets at a feast – and Anytus was grateful just to be left the other half.¹⁹ 'Good lord,' says Zeuxippus, 'how close he came to laying to rest that animosity against Anytus that was inherited from Socrates and philosophy, if he was as forbearing and noble as that about *eros*!' (762e–d).

'That animosity against Anytus that was inherited from Socrates and philosophy' ...: of course, no reader could forget that Anytus was to be Socrates' accuser at the trial. So, even when *eros* and banqueting is in point, it is hard to escape those hints of how it was all going to end. That was already the case in Plato's *Symposium* itself, and its implied defence of Socrates for the influence he exercised on Alcibiades – wholly for the good, if one believes what Plato makes Alcibiades himself say, whatever those appalling accusers of Socrates may have alleged. Plutarch agreed. The restraint that Socrates exercised on Alcibiades is stressed in *How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend* (69e): we shall see a good deal more of that in the *Alcibiades* itself.

¹⁸ Cf. Döring (1979), 10–11 on this as a distinctive concern of Plutarch as, for instance, of Maximus of Tyre and of Favorinus (who wrote a work *On Socrates and his Erotic Art*).

¹⁹ The story is told again at *Alcibiades* 4: below, p. 123.

Symposium suggested other things as well: for one thing, it showed how one-sided it would be to regard Socrates as *apolitical* – how, in a way, even Plato's *Apology* is a little one-sided here (31c–2a). That was only one way of looking at Socrates even for Plato: one remembers, for instance, the claim in *Gorgias* that he, and he alone, was the true statesman (521d–2a). And *Symposium*, with its stress on Socrates' history in the battle-line as well as in the agora, told a further story as well. This is the man who fought at Potidaea and at Delium (*Symp.* 219e–21b): Plutarch recalls that, for instance, in that indignant passage where he defends Socrates against Colotes' charge of hypocrisy: 'So Socrates said one thing and did another? What splendid evidence you have for that claim in his behaviour at Delium, at Potidaea, in the time of the Thirty, with Archelaus, with the people, his poverty, his death...' (*Against Colotes* 1117e). All hangs together, and his courageous stands against enemies, foreign and domestic, are all of a piece with that poverty and that death. For Seneca Socrates could serve as an example for how a sort of public engagement was possible even under the appalling regime of the Thirty;²⁰ for Epictetus an example of how one could live a full life in the city and still be a good philosopher, and the contrast for him is with the genuinely apolitical life of Diogenes.²¹ Plutarch, at least some of the time, could think of him similarly.

So Socrates' accusers got him wrong, catastrophically. Even where there is less at stake, people could get him wrong as well, in ways that are variously indicative of a different world. It may be the elder Cato, dismissing Socrates as a chatterbox and a bully, trying in his own way to be tyrant of his country through destroying customs and traditional views (*C. mai.* 23.1): that tells us nothing about Socrates but a good deal about Cato and the extreme version of stiff-necked Roman values that he represents. Or it may be the Indian sage Dandamis, who listens carefully to what he is told about Socrates, Pythagoras, and Diogenes, and comments that they were evidently gifted men, but had lived with too much respect for convention (*Alex.* 65.3): another eccentric

²⁰ Sen. *Tranq. An.* 5.1–3, discussed well by Döring (1979), 30–1: Seneca's supporting detail admittedly seems imaginative.

²¹ Döring (1979), 45–6, 55–6, 59–60 (for the Diogenes contrast see *On Freedom* 4.1.159–64).

reading, this time one that intrigues rather than alienates. Or it may even be Demetrius of Phalerum, as eager to 'relieve Socrates of the charge of penury' as he was also with Aristides: yet penury was not so great an evil as all that, thinks Plutarch (*Arist.* 1.9).

We might even wonder about *Phocion-Cato minor*, where Socrates' death is a powerful intertextual model for both heroes (ironically, given that Cato's ancestor was so dismissive of the 'chatterbox and the bully').²² But did even those more admiring figures get Socrates quite right? It is all very well for Phocion to pride himself on his trust he places in the shifty Nicanor and say that he would 'prefer to be seen to be the victim rather than the perpetrator of injustice'; but 'that would be all very honourable and noble if he were just considering himself, but it is different when it is one's country's future that is at stake and when one is a general and a magistrate, and I wonder whether there is not a higher principle that he is transgressing, the need to be just towards one's fellow-citizens' (*Phoc.* 32.6–7).²³ Cato too behaved 'as if he were living in Plato's *Republic* rather than in the sewer of the Roman state' (*Phoc.* 3.1, citing *Cic. Att.* 2.1.8), and there are certainly occasions when his over-rigid moral stance is seen to have endangered the state (esp. *C.min.* 30.9–10, cf. 8.4–5, 49–50, *Phoc.* 3.3). We see something of Favonius, a disciple of Cato who 'resembled what they say about Apollodorus of Phalerum as a follower of Socrates of old, a man who was an impassioned enthusiast for his words; there was nothing moderate about it, but they had taken hold of him like unmixed wine, and it was all too crazy' (46.1). Socratic wisdom can evidently be got wrong, and even with such admirable figures as Phocion and Cato it is not out of place to wonder whether they quite followed their model as they might.²⁴ Yet there is still far less doubt on the way their lives and deaths reflect on their cities, on that 'sewer of the Roman state' and on its counterpart 'the shipwreck of Athens' (*Phoc.* 3.1, 1.1). 'Phocion's fate reminded the Greeks of what

²² Cf. Duff (1999), 141–5, 149–50; Zadorojnyi (forthcoming).

²³ But Duff (1999), 146 is right to emphasise that on the whole Phocion emerges as the one who is more prepared to compromise, and it is Cato's highmindedness that posed the bigger practical problems. 'Ironically, it might have been better for the Republic and the laws which Cato claimed to protect if he had acted less like a philosopher and had indulged his passions a little more' (Duff (1999), 154).

²⁴ Duff (1999), 131–60 brings this out well.

happened to Socrates, and they thought how *the city's mistake and misfortune* had been so very similar' (*Phoc.* 38.5, the last sentence of the *Life* just as 'the shipwreck of Athens' was the first). That too fits what we have seen about the way that, for Plutarch, the trial reflected as much about Socrates' Athens as about Socrates himself.

So the dominant 'Socratic' themes are those of living virtuously, of integrity in matching actions to word, of how to talk and how to behave sympotically, of education, of how to die, of the contrast with the grim standards of Athenian politics, of how easy he was to misunderstand: a little more nuanced and a little fuller than those modern resonances of the name. True, there is not much here to mark Plutarch out from his near-contemporaries: and, much of this can be seen as an elaboration of the associations that Socrates would naturally have evoked in a first-century audience: it is no coincidence that Döring gave the title *Exemplum Virtutis* to his survey of (particularly) Seneca, Epictetus, and Dio of Prusa, for it was as an ethical paradigm that Socrates was particularly recalled. Seneca himself makes the point explicit: Socrates' school 'owed more to Socrates' character than his words', *plus ex moribus quam ex uerbis Socratis traxit* (*Ep.* 6.6). Some even quote 'Socrates' in the same way, as an equivalent of 'Plato's Socrates' but only when matters of 'how to live' are in point (e.g. Dio 3.1–2, 29–30, citing and then elaborating *Gorg.* 470e; 13.14, citing *Apol.* 29d; Aelius Aristides, *Against Plato on behalf of Rhetoric* p. 21 J.).²⁵ But some points – the problems of understanding Socrates, for instance, or the different ways of responding to his example – are more distinctively Plutarchan.

What is most distinctively Plutarchan of all is what he can do with those associations when he treats Socrates more fully. Let us turn to those fuller treatments.

Alcibiades

Education is a central theme in *Coriolanus–Alcibiades*, and *Coriolanus* comes first. By the time the reader reaches *Alcibiades*,

²⁵ Though notice also that Lucian makes fun from assuming that Socrates' views – on marriage, for instance, or on poetry – are just as Plato portrayed them (*Lives for sale* 15–18, *On the Art of being a Parasite* 19).

we already know how disastrously education can go wrong: Coriolanus himself is an extreme version of the educational deficiencies of the Rome of his day, devoted as the city was to the exclusive pursuit of military excellence (*Cor.* 1). In particular, the absence of Greek education made it easier to understand Coriolanus' harsh, unbending, irascible temper: 'For this is the most valuable gift of all that the Muses give to mankind – the taming of a person's nature through rationality and education, as through reason one comes to welcome moderation and abandon excess' (*Cor.* 1.5). And Coriolanus' story showed how he 'favoured the spirited and contentious part of his soul, and did not have that admixture of gravity and gentleness, central as those qualities are to political virtue, that reason and education can give. He did not realise that stubbornness, the characteristic that Plato described as "isolation's housemate" [*Epist.* 321c], is the one thing that needs to be avoided if one intends to embark on public life and consort with other people; instead one needs to court that quality that some deride so much, a tolerance of other people's defects' (*Cor.* 16.4). Coriolanus' temper stood him in good stead on the battlefield; in politics, it was catastrophic.²⁶

If anyone had every chance to do better, it was Alcibiades. He had the ability; he had the drive, and 'his ambition for honour and to be first' is strongly stressed at the beginning of the *Life* (2.1); and he also had the best teacher of all, Socrates, whose good will and warmth towards Alcibiades is mentioned in the first chapter.²⁷ Initially 'the love of Socrates', ὁ Σωκράτους ἔρως, was 'great testimony to the boy's natural potential for virtue' (4.1): interesting phraseology. 'The love of Socrates' must primarily be taken as 'the love that Socrates felt for him', as after all Socrates is the older man, naturally the 'lover' rather than the 'beloved'; and for the moment this 'love' is simply an indication of the boy's *natural* gifts that attract that love, rather than something that itself fosters and moulds those natural gifts in the

²⁶ For more on *Coriolanus*, cf. esp. Russell (1963); Duff (1999), 205–42; Pelling (2002), 152–6, 309–11, 339–47, 387–411.

²⁷ And there it is already associated with 'repute', δόξα, another main theme of the *Life*. At 1.3 it is the connection with Socrates that 'contributed to his fame' with later generations, for it meant that such personalia as the names of his nurse and his tutor would be remembered.

right direction. But we soon see that there is something odd and unusual about this 'love of Socrates'. It is not like the *eros* shown by Alcibiades' other pursuers. This is a man 'who was not chasing the unmanly pleasures of the lover (*erastes*) nor asking for kisses and embraces, but was exposing the rotten parts of Alcibiades' soul and squeezing his empty and mindless conceit' (4.5). The word for 'exposing' is ἐλέγχουτος, suggesting that Socratic *elenchos*, his questioning conversational manner that, we have already seen, so often captures what Socrates could do for others; and 'squeezing' suggests those wrestling-matches that the two men shared in literal reality as well as in figurative conversation (4.4; the word for 'squeeze', πιέζω, recurs and interacts with a different image at 6.5).²⁸ So Alcibiades 'came to think that Socrates' business'²⁹ was genuinely a service of the gods directed to the care and salvation of the young', τὸ μὲν Σωκράτους ἡγήσατο πρᾶγμα τῷ ὄντι θεῶν ὑπηρεσίαν εἰς νέων ἐπιμέλειαν εἶναι καὶ σωτηρίαν (4.4): we shall return later to the way that the language suggests the charges levied years later at Socrates' trial.³⁰ Consequently Alcibiades 'despised himself and admired Socrates; he delighted in Socrates' friendship and felt shame before the other man's virtue, and without realising it he acquired an "image of love that is love's counterpart", as Plato puts it...' (4.4). The reference is to *Phaedrus* 255d, and is bemusing unless one recalls the Platonic context. A beloved there catches sight of his own beauty by seeing himself through his lover's eyes; here it is precisely Socrates' view of Alcibiades that Alcibiades himself comes to glimpse and share, and a view that

²⁸ Duff (1999), 216–7. This wrestling was familiar both to Plutarch and to his readers from Plato's *Symposium* (217b–c).

²⁹ τὸ Σωκράτους πρᾶγμα, an odd phrase which Russell (1966), 39 n.2 = (1995), 195 n.14 observes is drawn from the words Plato puts in Alcibiades' own mouth at *Alc. I* 104d, 'I really wonder what on earth your business is, and I'd be delighted to know'. If the allusion is caught, the implication is that the young Alcibiades soon found the answer to his question. For further allusions to *Alc. I* see below, p. 122.

³⁰ Below, p. 123. As Duff (1999), 227 observes, the language here echoes the words of 'Socrates' himself at Plat. *Apol.* 30a, 'I think that my service to the god (τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν) is the best thing that has ever happened to the city'. Here both Plato and Plutarch combine defences against both charges, corrupting the youth and introducing new gods: Stadter (1998), 427, cf. Verdegem (2004), 41 n.75. The point is more striking because Plutarch normally pays little attention to the impiety charge (p. 112 and n.17 above),

captures his moral immaturity as well as his physical beauty. By now that 'love of Socrates' is not merely a response to and indication of the boy's potential for virtue, it is also nurturing that potential as well; and the complex picture of reciprocity involved may even suggest a hint of the other way of taking the phrase, of a love *for* Socrates in Alcibiades himself, or at least for what Socrates had to offer, just as *On Moral Virtue* 448e describes pupils of good teachers as 'lovers', *erastai*, rather than 'beloved'.³¹ That goes with the language used of the effect of the older man's company on Alcibiades, the way that these words can 'bite' and 'wound' such a boy (4.2), the way they 'grasped him and twisted his heart' (6.1 – once again language appropriate to wrestling, but also to erotics and to the obsessiveness that Alcibiades could sometimes show)³² and the way that 'the love of Socrates' would sometimes 'conquer' the young man (6.1).

The principal opponent in all this wrestling imagery is the enemy in Alcibiades' own soul: that again fits the allusion to the *Phaedrus*, which refers to Plato's famous comparison of the soul with a chariot-team, where one horse, the higher part of the soul, is obedient, while the other fights against charioteer and yokefellow in the quest for sexual fulfilment. The suggestions of the struggle of a higher and lower element, and of Alcibiades

³¹ Duff (1999), 217 n.36 notes the *On Moral Virtue* passage in this context: 'plainly a metaphorical use', he says, but the metaphor is significant, and the figure may be felt here as well. Notice also the way that the younger Cato attracted 'lovers and admirers', ἐρασταὶ καὶ θαυμασταί (*C.min.* 25.3, Duff (1999), 143), doubtless including the crazy Favonius (46.1: above, p. 115): that is the sort of *eros* that a charismatic leader or guide inspires.

³² There are subtle echoes here of the language of Alcibiades in *Symposium* (for the details, Russell (1966), 40 = (1995), 196); that too may contribute to the elucidation of 'the love of Socrates', for Alcibiades in *Symposium* may embody a version of the deeper *eros* that Socrates could instil in the young (a theme already introduced at the outset of the dialogue with Aristodemus as a particular *erastes* of Socrates, 173b3) as well as an indication of Socrates' own brand of *eros* in action. There is something of the same play in the *Symposium* itself at 213c–d: Socrates says that 'the love of this man' has become no slight matter for him, for 'since the time I fell in love with him' I cannot talk to any good-looking boy without his being intolerably jealous, so that he can't keep his hands off me... – behaviour perhaps more appropriate to the *erastes*, certainly enough to give point to Socrates' description of it as μανίαν τε καὶ φιλεραστίαν, 'crazy affection for an *erastes*'. By 217c Alcibiades tells how he plotted to seduce Socrates 'just as an *erastes* would have designs on his boyfriend', and at the end of his speech his hearers decide that 'he seemed still to be in love with Socrates', ὅτι ἐδόκει ἔτι ἐρωτικῶς ἔχειν τοῦ Σωκράτους, 222c.

grappling with his own unruly erotic nature, are not far to seek.³³ But there are other suggestions of the image too, for the struggle of the higher and lower parts is inspired precisely by the sight of a beautiful boy, and the unruly yokefellow throws himself at the boy for sexual fulfilment: that suggests those other opponents for Socrates too, those other rivals who are courting Alcibiades' favour. They even have their own wrestling imagery: Plutarch quotes Cleanthes' remark that 'his way of conquering the beloved was a single one, through the ears, but his rival lovers were offered many grasps that were not available to him, meaning the stomach and the genitals and the gullet...' (6.2 = Cleanthes fr. 614 Arn.). Alcibiades, of all people, was certainly susceptible to that sort of attraction as well as anything that Socrates had to offer: another impeccable authority, Thucydides (6.15.4), here joins the web of citations (6.4). There is a powerful triangle here, Alcibiades, Socrates, and his rivals, presaging the struggle between good and bad, between talent and temptation, that is so prominent throughout the *Life*.³⁴ The irony and the tragedy is that Alcibiades, despite all that brilliance and for all those opportunities for good that Socrates opened for him, will eventually live a career that is all too similar to that of the brutal and unlettered Coriolanus.

What we do *not* get here is much interest in exactly what Socrates taught him – what, for instance, Socrates might have said about Athenian democracy and all its faults: Socrates is virtue, Socrates is reasoned argument, Socrates is encouragement to know oneself, but it is what he embodied and how he went about it that matters, not what he believed or said. That interest in style and method extends to the rivals too: thus at 4.1 Plutarch has Socrates 'fearing the wealth and prestige and the crowd of citizens, foreigners, and allies, all striving to get Alcibiades first

³³ The *Phaedrus* passage is a favourite of Plutarch, who alludes to it several times elsewhere: cf. esp. *Ant.* 36.2 with Pelling (1988), 217 ad loc., *How to keep one's Health* 125b, *On Moral Virtue* 445c, *Platonic Questions* 1008c. It is a favourite of other second-century writers too (Trapp (1990)).

³⁴ 'It is crucial that, in Plutarch's depiction of the relationship, there is no resolution of the pedagogic struggle between Socrates and the flatterers' (Gribble (1999), 275), noting that the account ends in 6.5 with the imperfect tense ἐπιτελεῖ; 'Plutarch never makes it clear quite how Alcibiades benefits from his experience as a pupil of Socrates', Duff (1999), 220. Cf. Pelling (2002), 314–5.

with their flatteries and favours...' (φοβούμενος δὲ τὸν πλοῦτον καὶ τὸ ἀξίωμα καὶ τὸν προκαταλαμβάνοντα κολακείαις καὶ χάρισιν ἀστῶν καὶ ξένων καὶ συμμάχων ὄχλον). That is another Platonic allusion, this time to *Republic* 494c, where Plato describes the dangers that beset a truly philosophical nature: 'flatterers will lay in wait, begging and glorifying, getting in first with their anticipatory flatteries upon his future power' (ὑποκείσονται ἄρα δεόμενοι καὶ τιμῶντες, προκαταλαμβάνοντες καὶ προκολακεύοντες τὴν μέλλουσαν αὐτοῦ δύναμιν).³⁵ Plutarch is here teasing out what is an implication, no more, in the Platonic original, for the *Republic* does not name Alcibiades, even though Alcibiades would surely come to any knowledgeable reader's mind.³⁶

What might also come to any reader's mind is the complexity of Plato's argument, and particularly the implications for the city as well as for the individual. On the one hand, it is immersion in the politics of the city and political ambition that puts the truly philosophical nature at risk; on the other hand, that truly philosophical nature is exactly what the city *needs*. The community's future is at stake as well as the individual's. The triangle is becoming a rectangle, with the city as the fourth player – another idea that matters for the *Life* as a whole, for a crucial suggestion is that Alcibiades' characteristics are not so very different from those of the city itself.³⁷ The later counterparts of this erotic battle for Alcibiades' soul will therefore include the *eros* that Alcibiades inspired in the whole city for the Sicilian expedition (17.2); and the veering passions of Alcibiades also presage the veering passions of the whole citizen body, favouring at one moment Alcibiades himself and at the next his unscrupulous rivals. Thus they will be 'feeling a remarkable *eros* to have him as their tyrant' (34.7) – and only a little later his opponent Thrasybulus is accusing him of placing the city at risk while 'frolicking drunkenly and playing around with courtesans

³⁵ Gribble (1999), 15–16, 219–20, 272–3 with n.35; Duff (1999), 224–6.

³⁶ Thus Adam (1963) ad loc.: 'It has long been admitted that this picture is drawn chiefly from Alcibiades. In antiquity Plutarch seems to have suspected something of the sort, for he described Alcibiades' degeneration in language adapted from the present passage (*Alc.* 4.1)'. But 'degeneration' is not the right word.

³⁷ I have developed this theme in Pelling (2000), 53–4 and (2002), 125–8.

from Abydus and Ionia' (36.2). The charges are by now unfair; but these themes, so familiar from early in the *Life*, keep coming back in however jumbled a way,³⁸ and it all brings disaster.

All that is still far in the future, but not too unpredictable, especially against that Platonic background. It is precisely Alcibiades' future with the city that the erotic rivals are now targeting: both Socrates and the other lovers tickle that same 'ambition for honour and to be first' that we saw at the beginning of the *Life* (2.1, above p. 117). The flatterers 'cast him, in a way that was inappropriate for his youth'³⁹, into thoughts of great activity', and they dwelt on the vast power among the Greeks that Alcibiades will surely enjoy, greater even than that of Pericles (6.4). One recalls the way that those flatterers of the *Republic* 'got in first with their anticipatory flatteries upon his future power' (above, p. 121); and that phrase 'among the Greeks' also echoes Plato, this time *Alcibiades I*,⁴⁰ where it forms part of the argument that any success of Alcibiades will immediately lead to an upbidding of the area he aspires to dominate – Athens, Greece, Europe, the world. If that passage is recalled, that too underlines the dangers, as well as the extravagance, of the flatterers' language.

Socrates too, however, 'was eager that Alcibiades' ambition for honour *in good things* should grow' (βουλόμενος αὔξεσθαι τὸ φιλότιμον ἐν τοῖς καλοῖς αὐτοῦ, 7.5). Here too we have a Platonic original, this time the description which Plutarch takes over from *Symposium* of Potidaea and Delium. Particularly important is the prizegiving after Potidaea, where Socrates ensures that Alcibiades is awarded a prize which by rights belonged to Socrates himself: that is the way that Socrates tried to stimulate the right sort of ambition. The story is carefully retouched from *Symposium* to emphasise the point.⁴¹ And once again there is a

³⁸ More on this in Pelling (2000), 54–5.

³⁹ οὐ καθ' ὄραν – an elegant touch, for it is their enthusiasm for 'the brilliance (λαμπρότης) of his ὄρα', the physical attractiveness of his youth (4.1), that is leading them to speak in a way inappropriate to that ὄρα and aspire to political 'brilliance' too. That 'brilliance' duly comes early – 11.2, 12.1 – but when the word recurs later it marks crises in Alcibiades' fortunes (27.6, 34.1), then finally his death (39.7).

⁴⁰ Cf. Russell (1966), 40 = (1995), 196, and for an earlier allusion to *Alc. I* above, n.29. For the *Alc. I* passage itself, see Gribble (1999), 220–2.

⁴¹ Cf. Russell (1966), 41 = (1995), 197–8 on Plutarch's adaptation here of Plato *Symp.* 220e; Duff (1999), 217–8 on the implied comparison with Coriolanus' early

sort of reciprocity here, for in the retreat after Delium Alcibiades has the chance to repay Socrates for his earlier service, and duly 'escorted and protected him' (παρέπεμψε καὶ περιήμυεν) just as Socrates had earlier 'stood in front of and protected' the wounded Alcibiades at Potidaea (προέστη καὶ ἤμυεν, 7.4). This is the better side of Alcibiades, the side that knows how to repay Socrates in kind. The rest of the *Life* explores how Alcibiades repaid the flatterers in kind too, for the city's good and, particularly, for its ill. There has been a hint of that already: less than a page after those flatterers have been telling him that he will eclipse even Pericles, we have another suggestive story. Pericles is busy preparing the account he has to render to the Athenians; young Alcibiades muses that it would be better to reflect on how to *avoid* rendering any account (7.3). If that is how he hopes to outdo Pericles, it is not good.⁴²

We saw earlier that the shadow of Socrates' own trial is cast over at least one phrase in the account, that conclusion that the young Alcibiades draws 'that Socrates' business was genuinely a service of the gods directed to the care and salvation of the young' (4.4; above, p. 118). It cannot be coincidence that the next story is the one of Alcibiades' bad treatment of Anytus – the way he stole half of the man's cups, and Anytus was grateful to be left the rest (4.4–6). We have already come across that story in the *Amatorius*, and there the suggestion of Socrates' trial was clear – that 'animosity' between Anytus and philosophy that was seen in his clash with Socrates (762e–d; above, p. 113). The hint is not so clear here, but it is still not very far to seek when Socrates and

exploits. Plutarch omits Alcibiades' own initial request that the prize be given to Socrates, and concentrates simply on the wishes of the generals and Socrates. At first sight we might have expected Alcibiades' request to figure in his own biography, revealing of his character as it is; but the tussle between Socrates and the flatterers means that, paradoxically, Socrates' response is here more important than Alcibiades' own.

⁴² That is, I think, the case even if 'it is unclear whether such a comment would seem immoral in the eyes of a Greek reader of the imperial period, for whom Classical Athens meant the rule of Pericles and not democracy' (Duff (1999), 233). It is not so much the immorality that matters as the looming rift that this presages between the individual and the city, despite all the characteristics that they share. True, the citizens themselves may come to feel that 'remarkable *eros* to have him as their tyrant' (34.7), another way in which individual and city are too closely similar for comfort: but it is predictable too that this *eros* will not last, and it duly does not (above, p. 121).

Anytus are so closely juxtaposed, and when Alcibiades' drunken arrival at Anytus' house (4.5) is so similar to his belated drunken appearance in the *Symposium* (212c–d). Nor will it be coincidence that Anytus has already figured in the pair, and in a context of judicial corruption (*Cor.* 14.6). The various players in this erotic rectangle all have a future to play, and all the lines in the rectangle are interesting ones, including the lines linking Socrates himself with Alcibiades' rivals and with the people of Athens. And all those lines threaten darkness.

So many of those associations we noticed in the first section of this paper come back in *Alcibiades* – Socrates as an emblem of virtuous living, and of thoughtfulness and discussion of how to live; the importance of his educative role, and what he could do for others; the hints of the trial; the implications for Athens, and for what the reader can infer about the character and values of Athenian public life. But they are woven together in an intricate and suggestive way, and one in which Platonic intertextuality itself plays an important role. In *Coriolanus* too Platonic allusiveness is important, in ways too intricate to trace here: many of those ways were concerned with the dangers of overindulging the 'spirited' side of the soul, and the way this can play out in – again – the risks to a city, in that case when the more soldierly aspects of a great temperament are allowed to dominate.⁴³ There too a crucial phase was marked by a specific Platonic quotation, that reference to stubbornness as 'isolation's housemate' (*Cor.* 16.4; above, p. 117). The contrast of the two Platonic worlds captures something important about the two heroes, Coriolanus' rigidity and isolation from others, Alcibiades developing that 'image of love that is love's counterpart' (4.4; above, p. 118) as he is surrounded by those who dance affection and warmth upon his malleable nature. In each *Life* the Platonic allusiveness not merely accentuates a critical phase (how will Coriolanus react to his political reverses, how will Alcibiades' education and ambition turn out?); they also point the qualities that are the keys both to the strength and to the fragility of each man, that will build his greatness and then seal his fall. In each case, the city as well as the individual turns out to be the loser; in each case, those close to

⁴³ I say more about this in Pelling (2002), 344–5.

the central figure are encompassed by his fate. Socrates is not merely the potential saviour of Athens and of Alcibiades, he is their victim too.

On the Daimonion of Socrates

In *Alcibiades*, then, pervasive intertextuality with Plato lends depth and resonance to the sort of associations which we saw in Plutarch's other works, and draws the reader into tracing how rich is the possibility of learning from Socrates' example – and also how difficult it can be. That intertextual dimension is just as clear in our other extended test-case, the essay *On the Daimonion of Socrates*. Indeed, long before Socrates' *daimonion* is mentioned the readerly ear is ringing there with echoes of, in particular, the *Phaedo*, with that initial questioning of whether there is time to talk and whether the listeners are agreeable to the idea (575d–e ~ *Phaedo* 58c–d), and then the introduction of Simmias, the man of Thebes who was so important in *Phaedo* and is now the host here. He has 'been away for a long time in foreign parts and had travelled among strange peoples' (576c) – exactly as the Socrates of *Phaedo* had encouraged his interlocutors to do (78a, where Socrates was in fact talking to Cebes, but Cebes is not forgotten here either, 580e, 590a). Now Simmias has arrived home 'full of all sorts of myths and barbarian stories', not unlike the manner of Plato's Socrates himself. People keep visiting Simmias at his home, not unlike the way they visited Socrates in prison; but Simmias has a rather different reason for not being able to roam around, namely that he has suffered a nasty ailment of the leg and cannot move, only lie on his couch. In terms of narrative, that is most convenient, as it means that Simmias *cannot* involve himself in the action himself, and Plutarch therefore sidesteps the issue whether he would be an active participant like Pelopidas or a philosophical bystander like Epaminondas, an issue that (as we will see) is extremely important to the essay and particularly to the memories of Socrates within it. But there is a Platonic touch too in this ailment of the leg that leaves Simmias couch-bound, for Simmias even has a 'fastening' (ἐπίδεσμος, 589a) taken off his leg, a blander equivalent of the fetter removed from Socrates' leg at *Phaedo* 59e. And in *Phaedo* too Socrates receives his visitors

from his couch, and it is on his couch that the final scene shows the hemlock creeping up his – legs.⁴⁴

Is there a deeper sense in which the scene is re-enacting the life and death of Socrates? As they try to interpret this ‘supernatural sign’ the participants certainly look for clues in Socrates’ philosophical style, once again not in any particular doctrine but rather in the sort of thing he would say and the way he would go about it. This is the man ‘who particularly made philosophy a human discipline by ridding it of its pretentiousness and making it simple’ (ἀτυφία καὶ ἀφελεία μάλιστα δὴ φιλοσοφίαν ἐξανθρωπίσαντος, 582b); he was the one took up a more philosophical brand of culture and thought, favouring this simple and unaffected style as appropriate for a free person and particularly attuned to truthfulness, and dispersing pretension (τῦφος) to be the possession of the sophists as a sort of philosophical smokescreen’ (580b). That indeed is what makes it difficult to believe that he could have meant something so casual as a sound or a sneeze (or so Theocritus thinks, rightly or wrongly), for ‘that sort of thing would have shown empty pretension (τῦφος yet again) and bluster, not the truthfulness and simplicity which we think marked out the man as someone special’, 581b). Not that Socrates wanted to get rid of the gods completely: to say that would be to accept the charges of the likes of Meletus (580b). The difficulty that the essay needs to resolve is how to reconcile that down-to-earth style with the sort of divine inspiration that Socrates claimed, and that – all accept – there was evidence to believe was genuine. It might save him from something as trivial as a dirtying when a horde of pigs ran amok (580d–f); but it also allowed him to foresee things as momentous as the Athenian disaster in Sicily (581d), and it saved Socrates’ own life after Delium when a premonition took him along the route that turned out to be safe (581d–e). Whatever it was, it worked.

The discussion turns out to be an intricate one, and it is both advanced and complicated by the various other sorts of difficult

⁴⁴ For these and other Platonic echoes cf. esp. Hirzel (1912), 148–51; Corlu (1970), 93–5; Hardie (1986), 130, 135–6.

'signs' that participants recall and adduce:⁴⁵ the strange Egyptian letters at Alcmena's tomb (577e–578b), the various ways that the dead Lysis communicated or seemed to communicate with his devotees (583c, 585e–f), the dream of Hyapatodorus that the nervy Hipposthenidas and the confident Theocritus interpret so differently (586f–7c), the lightning-bolt on the right as the conspirators enter the city (594e), even the indications of the afterlife that Timarchus reported back (589f–92e) and that Socrates would have liked to investigate further (592f). The tyrants too have their problems in reading signals, especially the 'unclear rumour' (λόγον ἄσημον) that was circulating in the city (596a–b); and that in its turn produced other indications that the conspirators had trouble in reading as they wondered how much the tyrants really knew (595a, 596a–c). The sequence is punctuated too by news that keeps coming, in particular of the progress of the conspiracy. That too advances the conversation:⁴⁶ after Hipposthenidas' gloomy way of taking the dream has been dismissed, Simmias reports that Socrates himself had no time for those who thought they had encountered the divine in a vision (588c), and it was much better to think of a sort of daytime, perhaps wordless, 'voice' rather than anything that happened while asleep (588c–9f).⁴⁷

Yet this sequence of nervous messages highlights the question why they are having this discussion at all. It is after all the tensest of moments. All are agog and nervous, and if Hipposthenidas' nerve breaks he is in danger of not being alone; when the crisis arrives, it is understandable that people should worry and wonder whether Hipposthenidas may have not let the cat out of the bag (595a). So – amid all this nervousness, why talk about Socrates? The reason is never made explicit: like so much in the dialogue, the interconnection of the Socratic theme with the crisis of the

⁴⁵ On these see esp. Hardie (1996) with n. 66 below, and Babut (1984), 63–5 = (1994), 417–9; also Desideri (1984), 580–1, Brenk (1996), 45.

⁴⁶ On the interweaving of the 'philosophical part' with the narrative see esp. Desideri (1984). Hirzel (1912), 151 did not think much of it when compared with the *Phaedo*: 'Die geringere oder übertreibende Kunst Plutarchs zeigt sich auch hier wieder darin dass Handlung und Gespräch nicht in dem organischen Zusammenhang stehen wie bei Platon.' More generous verdicts tend to be given today.

⁴⁷ Babut (1984), 66 = (1994), 420 notes the contrast of different 'voices' here.

moment is left enigmatic,⁴⁸ and it is all the more so because Socrates is barely mentioned in the last phase of the essay once the time comes for action.

Yet perhaps the issue is not so distant from the immediate concerns after all. It is no surprise that these uncertain figures too should be looking for divine enlightenment on the best course for them to take, and divine encouragement now they have taken their decision: that choice of topic is psychologically revealing.⁴⁹ It is natural, then, for the conversation to turn to how that momentary inspiration allowed Socrates to escape with his life after Delium (581d–e): can any such inspiration bring the conspirators' success, perhaps even save their own lives now? It is something of a contrary counterpart of the *Phaedo* itself, where it is so natural for Socrates and his friends to turn to talk of *immortality*.

What is less clear is whether they get the guidance for which they are groping.⁵⁰ Perhaps they do; the enterprise is after all successful, and that tends to suggest that the confident talk of Charon that 'maybe some god is watching over us as we fight for justice' (595d) is not just whistling to keep up the spirits. The favourable sacrifices a little later tend to support him (595f). But with some of the earlier cases it is altogether less certain. For instance, Hipposthenidas' failure of nerve turns out not to be disastrous after all, and all because Chlidon's wife happened to have lent a horse-bridle to the neighbour the night before: Caphisias immediately interprets that as a sign that 'the gods are encouraging us towards the deed' (588b), an emphasis that is significantly absent from the parallel account of the conspiracy in

⁴⁸ Emblematic of the enigmatic style is the way that Simmias never got a straight answer out of Socrates (588c), and it is equally difficult to get a straight response from the taciturn Epaminondas (592f–3a).

⁴⁹ 'The fact that such a discussion takes place among the conspirators is apparently intended to add stature to their character, since they are depicted as being not only highly patriotic but also deeply religious and philosophical persons' (Stoike (1975), 236). No doubt: but nery and apprehensive persons too.

⁵⁰ This point is well made by Babut (1984), 53 and (1988), esp. 384–93 = (1994), 407 and esp. 432–41, correcting Riley (1977), who claimed that 'the narrative sections ... show how daimonic guidance manifests itself in the real world' (258). Ctr. also Hardie (1996), 132: '[t]he success of the action depends entirely on the intelligent plans of the conspirators and on the corresponding failure of the enemy to satisfactorily analyse events' – a sort of sign-reading, to be sure, but not on the daemonic level.

Pelopidas (8.5–8). Is that interpretation right? Or was it just coincidence? The essay immediately goes on to discuss people finding divine guidance when it is only wishful thinking (Simmius at 588c, quoting the model of Socrates himself); perhaps the affair of Chlidon's wife is just another example. And when it comes to the assassinations themselves the narrative itself rather leaves the impression that it was a combination of good luck and good planning that carried the plotters through.

But there may be a broader sense in which memories of Socrates might be able to give guidance. We have seen so often how Socrates himself, not just his *daimonion*, serves as an inspiring model for ethical thought. That is particularly true given that the moral issue most highlighted in the essay is how, and how far, the virtuous, philosophical soul – Epaminondas in particular – ought to get involved in political issues, especially when they are matters of life and death: precisely the issue that had been so absorbing for Socrates, and so central to many of his own discussions, in Plato and doubtless in life. Recent treatments have rightly focussed on this aspect of the Socratic model, and have suggested that this may give some indication of the answer Plutarch himself might have given to this practical dilemma. In particular, Daniel Babut, Aristoula Georgiadou and Frederick Brenk have elaborated the answer that was already sketched a generation ago in the commentary by Corlu, that Plutarch sides with Epaminondas in the stance he takes for, at least temporary, quietism:⁵¹ and, for Babut and Georgiadou in particular, memories of Socrates' own political stance add support to Epaminondas' position here. It would seem paradoxical to have Epaminondas, the one person who stays out of the violence and a sort of absent presence in the conspiracy, as the hero of the conspiracy's narrative; but that would not be the only paradox in Plutarch, and if that is right it may be an even more powerful indication that the Platonic Socrates, as a deep intertextual

⁵¹ Babut (1984), 72–3 = (1994), 426–7 and already (1969), 344–6; Georgiadou (1995a and b), (1996); Brenk (2002); for Corlu (1970), 20, 'Épaminondas incarne l'idéal plutarchéen de l'union de la philosophie et la politique'. Cf. also Desideri (1984), 576–7, though Desideri also brings out Plutarch's appreciation of the virtue and nerve of the active plotters (583) – but Epaminondas is still presented 'come il punto di riferimento ideale dei congiurati' (ib.). The emphasis of Barigazzi (1988) is similar. Hershbell (1988), 374–8 gives a balanced view.

presence, should fundamentally affect our reading. Epaminondas may indeed be 'the Boeotian Socrates', as so many scholars say, and if so it matters.⁵²

The issue is highlighted early in the dialogue. Epaminondas chooses to remain distant from the conspiracy (he indeed keeps rather more distance here than in the parallel narrative in *Pelopidas*⁵³): he fears it may get out of hand, and the whole city might be 'filled with slaughter' (577a). Most, naturally, of the participants do not take that view, and the first person to mention Epaminondas' stance does not do so in tones of respect: Epaminondas 'claims to be the best-educated of all Boeotians in respect of virtue, but is blunted and unkeen...', says Theocritus (576e), and those words ἀμβλύς and ἀπρόθυμος are not friendly ones. It is a skilful touch that the speaker of the narrative should be Epaminondas' own brother Caphisias: he clearly does not take the same view as Epaminondas himself, but that ensures that Epaminondas' position can also be stated with sympathy and understanding. 'If a doctor said he would cure a disease without recourse to iron and fire, you would not be sensible in forcing him to cut or burn...' (576f), he says, and it would be just the same to try to force Epaminondas into this against his own better judgement. One notices the characteristic Platonic doctor-analogy, and one might indeed recall Socrates' obdurate response to those who tried to bully him into public actions of which he disapproved. Not that this prevents Epaminondas' friends from trying a second time, as the crisis approaches, to 'urge him to the

⁵² The apt phrase of Kahle (1912), 85, often cited since (e.g. by Corlu (1970), 19, Stoike (1975), 241 n.1, Babut (1984), 57 = (1994), 411, Desideri (1984), 577, Hershbell (1988), 377, and Barigazzi (1988), 419). Riley (1977), 270 is refreshingly dissentient: 'Epaminondas is certainly not pictured as the equal of Socrates. Nobody could be.' But Riley's own statement of the balance is more tart than I would give: 'One side has the good education and mental detachment but is useless; the other is mired in worldly disturbances but performs noble deeds' (268). For Riley Socrates alone would be able to achieve the requisite balance between insight and action, guided by his *daimonion*. But one wonders how in fact Socrates would have behaved in this crisis: Georgiadou (1996), 121–2 implies that he, like Epaminondas, would have waited until the times allowed a better reconciliation of philosophy and politics, but that may be too ungenerous to the choice the conspirators do make.

⁵³ *Pel.* 7.5, 12.2, 6: cf. Barigazzi (1988), 415–6, Pelling (forthcoming). Notice that after the killings Epaminondas comes to join the conspirators 'with arms' at *Pel.* 12.2, whereas at 598c–d it is simply 'with friends'.

deed' (594b): but once again he replies firmly. Better to hold himself back so that there should be some who were unstained by the killing and who might therefore carry more authority with the people later. Not that he holds himself back completely: at the end of the essay he is waiting with others to greet the successful conspirators, and to summon the citizens to liberty (598c–d). But his hands are blood-free.

And is he right about this? Babut and Georgiadou⁵⁴ argue that he is, and that the Socratic model confirms it: Epaminondas will have nothing to do with the more violent edge of Boeotian politics, just as Socrates avoided that of Athens. But I wonder. It is true that we might *expect* Epaminondas to be right: he is one of Plutarch's intellectual heroes, so much so that he even figured as the first of all the *Parallel Lives*, paired with Scipio (probably Aemilianus). This is Plutarch's flagship hero. What is more, one of the clearer advances made in the conversation is in the argument, first made by Simmias and then by Epaminondas' father, that divine revelations of this sort can be geared to the particular gifts and talents of the person receiving them, so that Socrates was receptive to truths denied to ordinary mortals. If the gods are indeed selective, then Epaminondas of all people might be expected to be among their selection, and be right.⁵⁵

Yet Epaminondas' insights are not so unequivocally right or well-judged within the essay itself: not in his stiff refusal of the Crotoniate's request for the return for Lysis' bones (582c–586a),⁵⁶ not about this central issue either. He fears that

⁵⁴ Above, n.51, though Babut also wants there to be 'un certain équilibre entre les deux attitudes morales qui y sont confrontées', (1984), 75 = (1994), 429. But the 'balance' of his discussion comes down heavily on Epaminondas' side.

⁵⁵ Cf. Babut (1984) and (1988), 391–3 = (1994), 439–41, where he also argues that most of the plotters do *not* fall into this specially gifted class.

⁵⁶ There (*pace* e.g. Desideri (1984), 576–7) he is questionable both in treating the request as if it was an insulting attempt to buy off people who did not resent their penury (the gentlemanly language of the Crotoniate Theanor did not deserve such a put-down), and in treating the possibility of funds with such disdain. 'It is just as if you came offering arms to a city that you thought was at war, and then discovered it was at peace,' says Epaminondas (584a): and the analogy is closer than he thinks, for his colleagues do see themselves as at war with the Spartan occupying force, and funds are useful in warfare. As usual, the rights and wrongs of this dialogue are left enigmatic; but one might recall that remark that to be too philosophical at a time of crisis may compromise a higher principle too, the good of one's city (*Phoc.* 32.6–7, above p. 115).

the bloodshed may get out of hand (577a), but does it? The essay ends with jubilation, not with widespread slaying,⁵⁷ and even if Xenophon suggests that there was a certain amount of score-settling (*Hell.* 5.4.12), that is not an emphasis that Plutarch found room for even in *Pelopidas*. And Epaminondas' high-principled stance against 'killing any fellow-citizen without trial except in the presence of grave necessity' (594b) is all very well: but is this not 'grave necessity'? Epaminondas only manages to occupy the high moral ground by assuming without argument that this *is* the high moral ground.

It is also hard to believe that the ultimate conclusion is that *everyone* should have stayed out of the conspiracy. This after all was one of Boeotia's great achievements: these proud men of action are fighting for liberty, not unlike the ways that we see noble souls striving for liberty in the demonology (593d);⁵⁸ and could one, should one, forget the glory that this brought to Thebes and all that followed, Leuctra and so on? Or should we put more weight, as Brenk does, on all the internecine Greek bloodshed that followed in later centuries (579a, 579c–d), and think that that rather validates Epaminondas' viewpoint?⁵⁹ Or do both of those views fall into the trap of 'judging results by their outcomes', something that the prologue to the essay warns explicitly against? It is all very difficult; but whether or not *Pelopidas* had already been written with its enthusiastic praise of the deed (13.4–7) – praise that dwells precisely on its consequences, so perhaps it is not so unreasonable to weigh outcomes after all – it is hard to think that Plutarch's first addressees could readily have laid aside their expectations this was a glorious action, one where the risk of bloodshed was thoroughly worth taking, and that Plutarch the patriotic Boeotian would

In so Socratic a dialogue, Socrates' own acceptance of his penury is not too far away, but again as a problematic rather than as a clear model.

⁵⁷ Babut (1984), 56 = (1994), 410, Barigazzi (1988), 421–2, and Brenk (2002), 108 put weight on the fate of Cabirichus at 597b–c: not the most glorious moment of the liberation, it is true, but not I think enough to demonstrate that 'Epameinondas had been lucidly clairvoyant' (Brenk).

⁵⁸ Stoike (1975), 242–3. Barigazzi (1988), 411 is reluctant to bring the passages together in this way, but his principal argument is precisely the difficulty of reconciling such an exaltation of liberty with the position taken by Epaminondas. But that may be the point, and it may be a mistake to expect full harmonisation.

⁵⁹ Brenk (2002), 106–12.

approve. That, after all, is the suggestion of the original, Platonic setting of the dialogue, introduced by Archidamus who years later is encouraging Caphisias to tell the eager bystanders of what happened on that night. That recalls *Symposium* as well as *Phaedo*, and certainly gives the impression that it was not just any old conversation: but what made it a night to remember was the attack on the Cadmeia as much as the Socratic theme. 'Tell us of the deed, starting at the beginning and explaining how it was done, and <let us share in> the conversation which <we gather> happened <in your presence>...' (575d). That is not the way one introduces a 'deed' which was all a bad mistake.

Not even the Platonic intertext gives such clear guidance. True, there is that apolitical side to the Platonic Socrates; but we have also seen the other side, the way that the Socratic project could be seen as finding the right way of engaging in politics rather than avoiding politics completely, and that one of one's Socratic duties could certainly be to risk one's life when the needs of the city required.⁶⁰ We have also seen how easy it could be to misinterpret Socrates, and how Plutarch was very alert to the dangers of being too high-minded a philosopher when it came to political realities. We saw that in the case of *Phocion-Cato minor* (above, p. 115); we can also see it in the case of Dion, a man whose practical application of Plato's teaching left too many opportunities for less scrupulous opponents to exploit.⁶¹ Perhaps we should simply conclude that this dialogue does what the dialogue form is so suited to doing,⁶² and airs a difficult problem

⁶⁰ Above, p. 114. The relevance of this side of Socrates is stressed by Barigazzi (1988), 413 and esp. by Riley (1977); it is played down by Babut (1984), 71 = (1994), 425.

⁶¹ I explore this aspect of *Dion* more in Pelling (2004), 91–7.

⁶² Not that the dialogue form is at all straightforward here, no more straightforward indeed than in many dialogues of Plato, in particular *Phaedo* and *Symposium*. As in those two Platonic works, the introduction is in dramatic dialogue, with Archidamus and Caphisias as speakers. Most of the essay is then represented as spoken by Caphisias, who gives a narrative of the dialogue on the night of the conspiracy. That reported conversation includes further narratives, which themselves several times include reports of further dialogue. Thus, to take the most marked example, 595f–596c is a dialogue (Charon and Archias) within a narrative (Charon's) within a dialogue (Charon and the others) within a narrative (Caphisias') within a dialogue (Caphisias, Archidamus, and the others). This complexity has interesting narratological implications: I explore these elsewhere (Pelling (forthcoming)).

and allows us to feel the draw of both viewpoints without deciding firmly for either. After all, it does not look as if the issues about demonology are firmly resolved either.⁶³

And was it the combination of the two viewpoints, ensuring the right action now yet preserving Epaminondas for the right activity for him later, that really demonstrated that a supernatural, daemonic force was watching over Thebes?⁶⁴ Perhaps – but if so that could not be confidently known at the time, and does not demean the difficulty of the choices that those individuals had to make.⁶⁵ If any of Plutarch's readers were faced with similar choices, they might find them equally difficult, however hard they mulled over the problems and the historical models.

Conclusion

Where, then, does this leave the status of Plutarch's own text? For one attractive way of putting such a conclusion would be metatextual,⁶⁶ implying that Plutarch's own text aspired to the same effect on his own readers as Socrates had on his followers: if characters within the dialogue find it hard to get unambiguous guidance for real-life issues from thinking about Socrates, will Plutarch's readers find it any easier to derive clear guidance for their own day, and for the wisdom of quietist acquiescence in the realities of the Roman empire? Is the conclusion to be that there, too, it is all very difficult to be sure? It may indeed be not wholly amiss to read the work in some such way – but both the 'Socrates' and the 'Plutarch' side of this offer warnings that it would be easily to phrase this wrongly. The (textual) personality of

⁶³ Evidently I cannot pursue this here: cf. e.g. Döring (1984), with further bibliography. He comments on 'the irritation' scholars often show that the various demonological accounts in the essay seem to show 'considerable discordances and even inconsistencies' (378).

⁶⁴ Cf. Desideri (1984), esp. 585.

⁶⁵ As indeed Desideri stresses, *ib.*

⁶⁶ For a sophisticated metatextual reading, but one that concentrates rather on semiotics than on the Socratic model, see Hardie (1996), suggesting that the problematics of sign-reading may extend to the interpretation of the text itself. Hardie stresses the importance as well as the difficulties that the essay suggests in the reading of (any) signs, especially those relating to the distant past: the position I take here chimes well with that argument.

Plutarch, as developed in both *Lives* and *Moralia*, does not readily accommodate the pretensions implicit in a self-comparison with Socrates (this is a *very* different persona from that of, say, Dio of Prusa)⁶⁷; and 'metatextual' is an odd emphasis with Socrates, who famously wrote no texts and exercised his influence in different ways.

It may be better, perhaps, to start from learning rather than teaching, from Socrates as the diffident learner who is sceptical about knowing anything at all and yet contributes so much to philosophical learning, from philosophy as activity as much as philosophy as subject. For one thing that Plato's dialogues certainly do, and arguably *On the Daimonion of Socrates* does as well, is to illuminate *the way* to set about issues as well as the right answers to give: for Plato, a matter of dialectic and *elenchus*; for Plutarch, a matter of thoughtful and engaged reflection on the great models of the past. Plutarch can at the same time both find Socrates' example deeply inspiring, and, in a way utterly in keeping with the aporetic and self-questioning style that the example itself encourages, remain cautious and continually provisional about the best way of applying that example. How to live was indeed informed by how to read, how to remember the past, how to think about it, and how to go on talking about it and responding to how others – pupils, friends, reader – would think about it too: and one of the delights was in the provisionality and the caution, the awareness that the topics were too difficult and too eternal to allow easy and swift solutions, and would always repay revisiting. If there is a message for Plutarch's own generation, it is this, one concerning both the richness and the challenge of learning from the past. There is not much pretentiousness about that.

And that is a picture of the philosophical life that the honorand of this volume might find rather attractive, and that all

⁶⁷ For Dio's grandiose self-comparisons with Socrates cf. esp. speeches 12–13, but also 43.8–12, 47.7, 51.7–8, and 72.10–16; Döring (1979), 82–94, 106–12. Hershbell (1988), 374, follows Martin (1984), 87 in finding in *Amatorius* an implicit self-comparison to the Socrates of Plato's *Symposium*: perhaps (though I am not convinced) – but if so there is as much comparison with the Diotima of the *Symposium* as with Socrates himself, and as much distancing as emulation.

who have themselves loved and benefited from his conversation will find familiar.

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