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PLUTARCH, PLATO AND 'GREAT NATURES'

It is well-known that, at the start of his *Lives of Demetrios and Antony*, Plutarch justifies the inclusion into his *Parallel Lives* of 'one or two pairs' of Lives of men 'notorious for their vice'[1]. The precise meaning of this, and the identification of other pairs which might fall into the category of 'negative' or 'deterrent examples', has been much debated. Various other pairs have been suggested as 'negative examples', including the *Nikias - Crassus*[2], *Coriolanus - Alkibiades*[3], and *Pyrrhos - Marius*[4]. There is agreement on none of them[5]. Indeed, it seems in practice difficult to read even Antony, who dies in Kleopatra's arms, 'a Roman overcome by a Roman' (*Ant.* 77.7), or for that matter Alkibiades, who elicits such wild enthusiasm from the people of Athens, as wholly bad. Such a reading, which would see these Lives as 'deterrent examples', and such an interpretation of the programmatic opening of the *Demetrios - Antony*, would produce a corpus of Lives whose moral range is restricted and simplistic[6]. Neither in the world as we experience it, nor

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[1] I thank Paul Cartledge, Richard Hunter, and Christopher Pelling for their help and encouragement. Fuller treatments of all the passages discussed here can be found in DUFF, 1999, especially pp. 45-49, 52-71, 206-210, 224-227. All translations are my own.

[2] Nikias as a negative example: MARASCO, 1976, p. 22; NIKOLAIDIS, 1988, especially pp. 331-332; PICCIRILLI, 1989, pp. 14-16; *idem*, 1990b and c; *idem*, 1993, pp. ix-xvi; TITCHENER, 1991; MARTIN, 1995. PELLING, 1992, p. 35 n. 28 disagrees. At any rate, Nikias is criticised for his cowardice, hesitation and superstition (2.4-6; 4.3; 4.8; 8.2; 10.8; 22.2; *Nik.-Crass.* 1.2; 2.4; 2.6), but has many virtues too (e.g. 9.6; 12.5; 14.1; 16.3; 16.9; 17.1; 21.6-11; *Nik.-Crass.* 3.6; 5.1).

[3] RUSSELL, 1966, p. 37 n. 2; *idem*, 1973, p. 108; *idem*, 1982, p. 30; AALDERS, 1982, p. 9; MARASCO and NIKOLAIDIS (see previous n.).

[4] Also suggested by NIKOLAIDIS (see n. 2).

[5] The *Phil.* has also been suggested as a negative example, with, unusually, its partner, the *Flam.*, providing a positive paradigm: WALSH, 1992, especially pp. 217-218.

[6] *Cf.* the formal *synkriseis* which close most pairs of *Parallel Lives*: regarded by many as simplistic and disappointing, but see now DUFF, 1999, pp. 252-286.

A. PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ, J. GARCÍA LÓPEZ & R. Mª AGUILAR (Eds.), ***Plutarco, Platón y Aristóteles. Actas del V Congreso Internacional de la I.P.S. (Madrid-Cuenca, 4-7 de mayo de 1999)*****, Madrid, 1999.**

indeed in Plutarch's *Lives* themselves, can people be classified as simply or completely good or bad. This should not surprise us, given Plutarch's own admission that human nature is never wholly good (*Kim.* 2.4-5)[7]. In fact, Plutarch avoids labelling Demetrios and Antony as men simply 'bad' in themselves. Rather, he appeals to the Platonic doctrine of 'great natures'. It is the contention of this paper that this doctrine, set out in the *Republic*, and alluded to repeatedly by Plutarch, provides a key to the reading of these more negative, and, it will be argued, more morally challenging Lives.

The Demetrios - Antony and Plato's Republic: 'great natures' gone wrong

At the start of the *Demetrios - Antony* Plutarch muses on the educative value of looking at bad examples, examples of what not to imitate. The arts, he argues, can better be practised by understanding what is to be avoided as well as what is to be sought after. Thus, students of medicine study disease, and students of music, discord. The same could be said, he goes on, of the different branches of virtue, 'the most perfect arts of all' (αἵ τε πασῶν τελεώταται τεχνῶν). For, he continues, innocence (ἀκακία) which is based on inexperience of evil, is not to be praised, but is rather 'silliness and ignorance of what those who intend to live correctly ought to know' (*Demetr.* 1.4). The practice of virtue, then, according to Plutarch, is to be aided by an understanding of vice. He goes on, in a subtle, self-reflexive move typical of his prologues, to cite a negative example: how *not* to carry out this principle. The Spartans, Plutarch tells us, used to force helots to get drunk in order to demonstrate to their young men the dangers of drunkenness. Plutarch disapproves:

> "But perhaps it is not such a bad idea for me to insert into the paradigms of my Lives one or two pairs of men who conducted themselves in a more unreflecting way (τῶν δὲ κεχρημένων ἀσκεπτότερον αὑτοῖς) and who became in their positions of power and amid great affairs notorious for their vice (ἐπιφανῶν εἰς κακίαν)". (*Demetr.* 1.5)

A better model, Plutarch goes on, for the educative use of bad examples are the flute players who used to take their pupils to see bad flautists as well as good ones. He continues:

> "In the same way I think we will be more enthusiastic both as spectators and imitators of the better Lives (τῶν βελτιόνων...βίων), if we do not leave unexamined the base and the castigated (τῶν φαύλων καὶ ψεγομένων)." (1.6)

Plutarch's rationale, then, for introducing 'one or two pairs' of men not worthy of imitation rests here on the premiss that the reader, through the use of reason, can

[7] *Cf. Agis/Kleom.* 37(16).8; *Virt. doc.* 439b; *Aud. poet.* 25b-d; 26a; *Soll. an.* 964d-e; *Laud. ips.* 545e.

distinguish virtue and vice. The reader should not be in a state of innocence or ignorance about vice, but, through studying some examples of men 'notorious for vice', should learn the better to avoid it and become more enthusiastic and discerning in the study of virtuous, or as he puts it, probably significantly, of 'better' men[8].

The implication of this passage seems to be that the two Lives which will follow are to be seen as negative or 'deterrent' examples, examples of how not to live. But when in the next sentence Plutarch introduces Demetrios and Antony by name, he alludes to a passage of Plato:

> "This book will contain the life of Demetrios the Besieger and that of Antony the Imperator, men who most bore witness (μαρτυρησάντων) to Plato's assertion that great natures (αἱ μεγάλαι φύσεις) produce great vices as well as great virtues". (*Demetr.* 1.7)

The allusion is almost certainly to a passage in Plato's *Republic*. It is worth looking at this in some detail. Plato's Sokrates has been discussing the nature of the true philosopher (491b-492a)[9]. The philosophical nature, Sokrates has argued, is rare and is often corrupted and diverted from philosophy by those qualities of nature which are often praised, such as manliness and self-control, and by so-called good things, such as beauty, wealth, strength of body, and a powerful family (491b-c). In the plant and animal worlds, the most vigorous seeds or growths suffer most from deprivation of their proper nurture. Sokrates continues:

> "'It makes sense, I think, that the best nature comes off worse than the poor nature in conditions of nurture which are more alien to it (τὴν ἀρίστην φύσιν ἐν ἀλλοτριωτέρᾳ οὖσαν τροφῇ κάκιον ἀπαλλάττειν τῆς φαύλης).' 'That is so.' 'So,' I said, 'Adeimantos, should we not say that, in the same way, those souls which have the best natural endowment but which have had a bad education become especially bad (τὰς εὐφυεστάτας κακῆς παιδαγωγίας τυχούσας διαφερόντως κακὰς γίγνεσθαι)? Or do you think that great crimes and unmixed evil stem from a poor nature and not from a vigorous one which has been corrupted by nurture? Do you think that a weak nature would ever be responsible for either great good or great evil?' 'No,' he replied, 'that is correct.' 'So I think that the nature which we posited for the philosopher, if it receives the proper teaching, must grow and reach complete virtue; but if it is sown, planted, and brought up in an unsuitable environment, the opposite will happen - unless one of the gods happens to help it!'" (*Republic* 491d-492a)

Men with 'great natures', then, that is, men with great natural endowments, can turn out either very well or very badly, depending on the education and the nurture

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8 The comparative was noted by ANDREI, 1989, p. 39. On its significance, see below, p. 328.

9 The idea of 'great natures' is also seen in *Crito* 44d; *Hipp. Min.* 375e; *Gorgias* 525e; Xen. *Mem.* IV 1.4; ps.-Aristotle, *Probl.* 30.1, 953a10-32 (on which see below, p. 323).

which they receive. Plato's Sokrates goes on to give a picture of the sort of man who might thus be diverted from philosophy by his inappropriate environment. It is a picture which is unmistakably intended to bring his younger contemporary Alkibiades to mind[10]. The traits of 'this sort of nature' are quickness to learn, a good memory, courage, and magnificence. Even as a boy he will be 'first', especially if his body 'is by nature' (φυῇ) as excellent as his soul (494b). As a youth he will be flattered and fawned upon (προκαταλαμβάνοντες καὶ προκολακεύοντες) by people who anticipate his future power. How, Sokrates asks, would one expect a youth to behave in these conditions, especially if he is from a great city, and is wealthy and nobly-born, and also handsome and large (494b-c)? He answers the question himself: 'Do you not consider that he will be filled with boundless hope, thinking that he is capable of managing the affairs of both Greeks and barbarians, and that he will exalt himself on this, filled with posturing and empty, senseless pride?' (494c-d). 'Someone', Plato continues, may come and gently tell a man like this the truth: 'that he has no sense, and needs it, and that it is not obtainable unless one works like a slave to obtain it' (494d). But he will either refuse to listen, or, if he does, he will soon be drawn away from philosophy by his companions (494d-495a). That 'someone' is plainly Sokrates, and the picture fits the Alkibiades of the *Symposium* and *Alkibiades I*, and is taken up in Plutarch's Life. Plato's Sokrates concludes:

> "'So do you see', I said, 'that we were not wrong in saying that the very qualities of the philosophical nature (τὰ τῆς φιλοσόφου φύσεως μέρη), when they get bad nurture (ὅταν ἐν κακῇ τροφῇ γένηται), actually become responsible, in a way, for its falling away from the pursuit [of philosophy], as do the so-called good things - wealth and all such resources?'. 'Yes,' he said, 'what we said was correct.' 'This,' I said, 'my good friend, is the way the best nature is destroyed and corrupted so completely as regards the best pursuit, a nature which is rare anyway, as we affirm. From these men come both those who do the greatest evil to their cities and to individuals - and those who do the greatest good, whoever happen to flow in that direction (οἳ ἂν ταύτῃ τύχωσι ῥυέντες). For a little nature never does anything great, either to an individual or to a city (σμικρὰ δὲ φύσις οὐδὲν μέγα οὐδέποτε οὐδένα οὔτε ἰδιώτην οὔτε πόλιν δρᾷ)'". (Plato, *Republic* 495a-b)

Thus Plato returns to the doctrine of the 'great nature', and it is now even clearer that he has Alkibiades particularly in mind. He, more than any other Athenian, could be said to have done 'the greatest evil and the greatest good to his city' -an ambiguity which Plutarch was to exploit in the *Life of Alkibiades*.

'Great natures', then, for Plato, may exhibit either great vices or great virtues: men with great natural potential can use that potential for great good or great ill. The

[10] *Cf.* ADAM, 1902, nn. to 494c, 494d, 495b (also to 519b, 239a); GRIBBLE, 1994, pp. 238-240.

determinant factor in whether men of 'great natures' turn out helpful or destructive to their countries is the environment in which they are brought up, and, more specifically, the education which they receive -a very Platonic theme and one which Plutarch was to find particularly attractive[11]. It is as examples of this Platonic theory that Plutarch's *Demetrios - Antony*, his *Alkibiades - Coriolanus* and, as we shall see, several other pairs, are introduced: they are men with great natural potential but whose potential, whose 'great nature', has been perverted through a bad environment and specifically a bad education[12]. They are not simply bad men, rather they are great men gone wrong.

On why the gods are so slow to punish

Plutarch's adoption of this Platonic doctrine has important implications for our understanding both of the *Demetrios - Antony* pair and of Plutarch's more negative Lives in general. In fact, he discusses this doctrine explicitly and at greater length in a passage from the treatise *On why the gods are so slow to punish.* This text almost certainly predates the *Demetrios - Antony* and perhaps the whole corpus of *Parallel Lives*[13]. Here Plutarch is explaining the fact that some evil-doers escape punishment (551e-552d). The god, he asserts, can see that such men will also do great good, though human beings do not always allow the god's plan to work. One of the examples Plutarch chooses is, significantly, Alkibiades, Plato's paradigmatic 'great nature'. This fact, together with the central agricultural imagery, makes clear that Plutarch has in mind once again the key passage from the *Republic.* If Alkibiades had lived, Plutarch maintains, he could have done great good to his city, but, regrettably, he was exiled by the Athenians for his apparently tyrannical leanings (552b). Plutarch continues:

> "For great natures (αἱ μεγάλαι φύσεις) produce nothing small, and, because of their keenness, the vigour and activity within them do not lie inactive (οὐδ' ἀργεῖ)[14]. but they drift in the flood before they come to an abiding and settled character (εἰς τὸ μόνιμον καὶ καθεστηκὸς ἦθος). Someone who is ignorant of agriculture would not embrace land when he saw it full of dense thicket and wild plants, and infested with wild animals and rivers and lots of mud. But for someone who has learnt discernment and judgement, these very things show the strength, the abundance and the

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11 On the theme of education in the *Lives*, see PELLING, 1989; SWAIN, 1989, pp. 62-66; *idem*, 1990 [partly summarised in *idem*, 1996, pp. 140-144]; DUFF, 1999, pp. 73-78. On Platonic conceptions of education, see GILL, 1985; *cf.* also *Rep.* 441e-444a; 548b-c; 549a-b; 606a.

12 In fact, Plutarch twice refers to Demetrios' good natural qualities (εὐφυΐα: 4.5; 20.2).

13 See JONES, 1966, p. 71.

14 The etymology of ἀργεῖν from ἀ-ἔργον is important: men with 'great natures' always perform some sort of 'exploit'(ἔργον), good or bad. For ἀργεῖν of land lying fallow, *cf.* Xen., *Cyr.* I 6.11.

> softness of the land. In the same way great natures first put forth (προεξανθοῦσιν) many strange and worthless shoots. We, unable to bear their roughness and thorns, think that we should immediately cut them off and prune them back. But a better judge actually sees in these things the land's good and noble nature, and waits for the maturity which works with reason and virtue, and for the season when its nature brings forth its proper fruit (περιμένει λόγου καὶ ἀρετῆς συνεργὸν ἡλικίαν καὶ ὥραν, ᾗ τὸν οἰκεῖον ἡ φύσις καρπὸν ἀποδίδωσι)". (*Sera num. vind.* 552c-d)

Good men, like good land, may turn out very badly, if they are not given the proper nurture. Or to put it another way, apparently bad men, like apparently poor land, may turn out well; indeed the same qualities of greatness which can make them particularly destructive for both themselves and their states, may, with proper nurture, make them particularly good[15]. It is on this basis, as we shall see, that the *Demetrios - Antony* must be read.

The *Coriolanus - Alkibiades*

Plutarch plainly found the notion of 'great natures', and the imagery of plant-life with which Plato illustrated it, an attractive one when he came to write the *Parallel Lives*. Not only does he use this notion explicitly at the start of the *Demetrios - Antony*; in fact, its most explicit and extended use occurs at the start of the *Coriolanus - Alkibiades*, another pair of rather doubtful status. Unusually here the Roman Life precedes the Greek Life. The *Life of Coriolanus* begins with a discussion of Coriolanus' ancestors. Plutarch mentions that one was a king, two brought abundant water into Rome, while a fourth, Marcius Censorinus, after election twice to the office of censor, persuaded the people to make such re-election illegal (1.1). As so often in Plutarch, ancestors are used to provide a paradigm through and against which the protagonist is to be measured[16]. As becomes clear in the pages that follow, Coriolanus did great services to his city, like his ancestors; but he also did great harm - itself a characteristic of men whose 'great natures' are not properly educated (Plato, *Rep.* 495b).

Plutarch continues by discussing Coriolanus' upbringing in terms, particularly those drawn from agriculture, which recall both Plato's discussion of 'great natures' in the *Republic*, and Plutarch's own treatment of the subject in the *On why the gods are so slow to punish*:

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[15] *Cf. Praec. ger. reip.* 819f, where 'love of honour' is said to be innate 'not so much in lazy and humble characters but in very strong and impetuous ones'.

[16] See DUFF, 1999, pp. 310-311.

> "Gaius Marcius, about whom what follows has been written, lost his father and became an orphan, and was brought up by his mother. He showed, however, that although being an orphan has many bad features in general, it is no impediment to becoming a serious man who surpasses the majority, but that the worthless (τοῖς φαύλοις) accuse and censure their condition in vain, when they say that it ruins them by neglect. But the same man confirms (ἐμαρτύρησε) the views of those who maintain that even if nature is noble and good but is deprived of education (ἐὰν οὖσα γενναία καὶ ἀγαθὴ παιδείας ἐνδεὴς γένηται), it brings forth many bad fruits along with the good, just like rich farm land which has not received the proper care". (*Cor* 1.2-3)

Coriolanus' nature, then, was good, but was perverted not, despite what some had presumably argued, by his being an orphan, but by a lack of proper education. He is a paradigm of, he bears witness to, the evil consequences which a lack of education brings: a very Plutarchan theme[17]. But more than that, he is a paradigm of the man of 'great nature': capable of both great good and great evil. The emphasis of the passage from the *On why the gods are so slow to punish* had been that, with proper nurture, and time, apparently bad men, like apparently poor land, may turn out well; indeed the same qualities of greatness which make them particularly destructive, may, with proper nurture, make them particularly good. Coriolanus is presented at the start of his Life as a negative proof of this doctrine. He had a 'good and noble nature' but lacked the proper education he needed; he is therefore like uncultivated and wild land.

Plutarch goes on to indicate the flaws in Coriolanus' character that this lack of education brought (*Cor.* 1.4-5). He has great abilities, but these are perverted by his poor education. He has strength and resolution, which allow him to perform great deeds. But combined with this is an inability to control his 'unmixed passions' (θυμοῖς ἀκράτοις) and 'unbending rivalries' (φιλονικίαις ἀτρέπτοις), his obstinacy and his unapproachability, which will lead, later in the Life, to his taking up arms against his own country[18]. It is not, Plutarch tells us, that Coriolanus was without virtue: his 'insensibility' (ἀπάθεια) to pleasure, pain, and the temptations of money were sufficient proof of that, as was his manly courage. But as with Demetrios and Antony, two other men of 'great nature', the same traits are both strengths and weaknesses. His 'insensibility', a virtue in some contexts, particularly in military ones, is what will lead to his incapability in politics and his downfall. Plutarch sums up 'For men can enjoy no greater favour from the Muses than the

[17] On this passage, see also RUSSELL, 1963, pp. 23 and 27 (=1995, pp. 361-362 and 370); PELLING, 1989, pp. 206-207; SWAIN, 1990, pp. 136-137; DUFF, 1999, pp. 206-210.

[18] He is later (15.5) described as ἀτενής (intense, unbending, stubborn). For such natures condemned, *cf. Vitios. pud.* 529a: ἡ ἄτρεπτος καὶ ἀτενὴς διάθεσις; *cf. Sull.* 30.4.

taming of their nature by reason and education, having received moderation by means of reason and having got rid of excess' (*Cor.* 1.5).

Coriolanus' lack of education leads to an unsociability and an inability to control the passions which will destroy him. His *apatheia*, literally 'lack of passion', is of a very limited kind indeed[19]. All this becomes clear in Plutarch's description of his military training (2.1): he is by nature 'passionate' (ἐμπαθής) for war; he handles arms from boyhood, but lays special store by his ability to wrestle: his 'natural and native weapon' (τὸ σύμφυτον ὅπλον καὶ συγγενὲς). It is an insight which will have special significance for Coriolanus as the Life progresses. He relies on nature before education, on innate strength and endurance rather than reason or anything taught. Plato, in the passage from the *Republic* which seems to have influenced Plutarch so much, considered that, without divine intervention, it was impossible for a man to escape the ill effects of a bad environment (*Rep.* 492a; 492e-493a). Plutarch, however, in the *On why the gods are so slow to punish*, said that the god is prepared to delay punishment for those 'to whom vice is not by nature unmixed or unbending' (551d: οἷς οὐκ ἄκρατος οὐδ' ἄτρεπτος ἡ κακία πέφυκε): for these men of 'great natures' there is hope of better things to come. For Coriolanus, ill-educated, unreasoning, and obstinate, there was no hope.

Coriolanus meets a fate which one might have expected: successful in war, but rejected in politics, he is overcome by his passions - a failing which later in the Life Plutarch links explicitly to his lack of education (15.4-5). Having betrayed his city, he dies in exile, embittered and alone, murdered by those whom he had used to gain revenge on his own people. As a parallel to Coriolanus, Plutarch chose the flamboyant and charming Alkibiades - hardly a surprise given both Plutarch's dependence in the *Coriolanus* on the passage of the *Republic* and given the hints so clearly made there that it is Alkibiades whom Plato had in mind. Plutarch's Alkibiades is, then, like Plato's, a 'great nature' gone wrong[20]. Plutarch gives his clearest indication that he is following this Platonic model when, towards the start of the *Life of*

[19] This is presumably an implicit attack on the Stoic championing of *apatheia*. On Plutarch and Stoic *apatheia*, see BABUT, 1969, pp. 319-333; SPANNEUT, 1994, pp. 4704-4707.

[20] In other texts, Plutarch speaks of Alkibiades as a 'great nature'. This is the implication, as has been noted, of *Ser. num. vind.* 552b (see above p. 317). In the *Nik.*, Alkibiades is compared (9.1), significantly in view of the repeated agricultural metaphors associated with discussions of 'great natures', to the soil of Egypt which 'because of its excellence (δι' ἀρετὴν) produces together *many good drugs intermingled with many deadly ones*' (a quotation from Homer, *Od.* 4.230). 'In the same way', Plutarch goes on, 'the nature of Alkibiades, flowing in full force and brightness to both sides (ἐπ' ἀμφότερα πολλὴ ῥυεῖσα καὶ λαμπρά), afforded cause for great innovations': a clear allusion to Plato, *Rep.* 495b.

Alkibiades itself, he discusses Alkibiades' susceptibility to flattery, and Sokrates' attempts to teach him philosophy. Though Alkibiades' other lovers are struck by his beauty (4.1), Sokrates falls in love with, and therefore confirms, his potential for virtue (τῆς πρὸς ἀρετὴν εὐφυΐας; *cf.* 6.1). Sokrates fears his wealth and public esteem and 'the mob which was anticipating them with flatteries and fawnings' (τὸν προκαταλαμβάνοντα κολακείαις καὶ χάρισιν...ὄχλον: see *Rep.* 494c). So he is inclined to protect him and not allow, as Plutarch puts it, 'as it were a plant in flower (φυτὸν ἐν ἄνθει) to throw away and corrupt its natural fruit'. The imagery of plant-life confirms that Plutarch has in mind the passage from the *Republic*. He goes on: Alkibiades, because of his good nature (ὑπ' εὐφυΐας), chooses Sokrates and not his other lovers. He recognises that Sokrates' work was 'really a service provided by the gods (θεῶν ὑπηρεσίαν) for the care and salvation of the young' (4.4). This, according to Plutarch in *To an uneducated ruler* (780d), is a quotation from the Academic philosopher Polemon and referred in its original context to love (ἔρως). Possibly the original context concerned the love of Sokrates for Alkibiades; the thought, at any rate, is probably derived ultimately from Sokrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium* (204c-2212b).[21] It is a fine tribute to Sokrates on Plutarch's part. It echoes Sokrates' own defence at his trial (*Apology* 30a)[22], but also assimilates Sokrates himself to the divine intervention which Plato said was the only way in which a man like Alkibiades might be saved from the corrupting influences of his society (*Rep.* 492a and 492e-493a). Alkibiades, however, as Plutarch is keen to point out, was only a half-hearted pupil of Sokrates, and therefore never fully gains the moral maturity he needs.

Other 'great natures' gone wrong

Plutarch follows Plato, then, in making his Alkibiades a 'great nature': someone capable of both great good and great evil - a feature of the wider tradition on Alkibiades[23]. Coriolanus too is a man of 'great nature' who does not receive the

[21] It is quoted also in *Thes.-Rom.* 1.6 to refer to Ariadne's love for Theseus. See FLACELIÈRE, 1948, pp. 101-102; AMPOLO and MANFREDINI, 1988, pp. 342.

[22] ἐγὼ οἴομαι οὐδέν πω ὑμῖν μεῖζον ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει ἢ τὴν ἐμὴν τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν.

[23] E.g. Aristoph., *Frogs* 1420-1457; Xen., *Hell.* I 4.13-17; Dem., *In Meidiam* 143-150. Thucydides suggests that the unconventionality of Alkibiades' private life, and his over-blown personal ambition, led the Athenians to suspect that he wanted to become tyrant (VI 15.3-4). But Thucydides also recognises Alkibiades' services to Athens (e.g. VIII 86.4). *Cf.* the speeches of Isokrates (*De Bigis*) in favour of Alkibiades, and the speeches of Lysias (*Or.* 14; *cf.* frs. 30-31 GERNET-BIZOT) and ps.- Andokides (*Or.* 4) against Alkibiades.

proper nurture; a great military man he therefore combines his many virtues with a tendency to anger and an obstinacy which makes him unbearable to his fellow citizens. We shall return at the end of this paper to a discussion of the implications of Plutarch's taking up of this doctrine. First, however, are there are any other individuals for whom Plutarch invokes this rubric? One such is the youthful Themistokles, though here it is implied that he improved later in life. He was, Plutarch says, 'uneven' (ἀνώμαλος) and 'unstable' (ἀστάθμητος) -like Alkibiades, whose unevenness and instability of character are central to Plutarch's presentation of him[24], and like the paradigmatic 'great natures' of *On why the gods are so slow to punish* 552c. The reason was that, as Plutarch explains,

> "...his nature was unadulterated (τῇ φύσει καθ' αὑτὴν χρώμενος), and so, without reason or education (ἄνευ λόγου καὶ παιδείας), produced great changes of habit to both good and bad, and often degenerated for the worse, as he himself later used to admit, saying that even the most intractable colts become excellent horses, when they get the education and discipline (παιδείας καὶ καταρτύσεως) they require". (*Them.* 2.7)

Themistokles, then, is like Alkibiades in his instability of character, which is linked with poor education and with his having, like Alkibiades, a 'great nature'. But in another way, Themistokles is very different from Alkibiades. Themistokles, it is implied, did improve as his life progressed - proof that for Plutarch the notion of a 'great nature' does not necessarily imply moral failure, though it tends indeed to be invoked in such contexts. 'Great natures' can swing to the good as well as to the ill.

Another use of the notion of the 'great nature' is near the start of the *Lysander - Sulla*. Plutarch appeals explicitly to this doctrine in the discussion of the upbringing and character of Lysander (*Lys.* 2.1-6). This section of direct character analysis at the start of the Life, a common feature of Plutarchan biography, signals the character traits which are significant in this pair of Lives: ambition, the ability to flatter, and a tendency to anger[25]. It also suggests a certain moral ambiguity about Lysander. Here Plutarch both points out apparent flaws in Lysander's character - flaws which will indeed be destructive, both for himself and even more for his state -, but at the same time explains them by reference to his upbringing. In particular, Lysander's driving ambition and competitiveness are explained as a natural result of the peculiarly competitive Spartan education system. 'Love of honour and love

[24] Explicitly expressed in *Alk.* 2.1 and 16.9, which frame a series of anecdotes, explicitly introduced to demonstrate the inconsistencies and changes of his character (ἀνομοιότητας πρὸς αὑτὸ καὶ μεταβολάς).

[25] *Cf.* PELLING, 1988a, pp. 269-270, on this section as a rather crude presentation of traits, which are then progressively redefined as the Life continues.

of victory, then', Plutarch reasons, 'were firmly implanted in him by his Lakonian training, and his nature should not be blamed too much for this' (τὸ μὲν οὖν φιλότιμον αὐτῷ καὶ φιλόνικον ἐκ τῆς Λακωνικῆς παρέμεινε παιδείας ἐγγενόμενον, καὶ οὐδέν τι μέγα χρὴ τὴν φύσιν ἐν τούτοις αἰτιᾶσθαι). We are on the familiar ground of Platonic and Plutarchan character theory, which holds that nature is unchangeable, but character is the result of the action of one's environment on that nature[26]. Furthermore, an ambitious character was for Plutarch, as for Plato, a spur to action, particularly in the young; but ambition was also a dangerous force which can easily get out of control - as indeed it is to do in Lysander's case.

Lysander's destruction by a trait which leads both to his successes and to his worst moral failures, and the cause of these failures as lying in an inadequate education, are both characteristic of the Plutarchan 'great nature'. But it is in the discussion of Lysander's tendency to anger that Plutarch introduces explicitly the doctrine of 'great natures'. Here Plutarch follows the lead of the [pseudo-]Aristotelian *Problems* in relating Lysander's anger to *melancholia* (2.5). 'Aristotle', he says rather abruptly, 'when he declares that great natures, like those of Sokrates, Plato, and Herakles, have a tendency to *melancholia* (τὰς μεγάλας φύσεις ἀποφαίνων μελαγχολικάς), writes also that Lysander, not immediately, but when older, succumbed to *melancholia*.' (2.5). In the passage to which Plutarch alludes, the author associates *melancholia* (literally 'black bile') with 'those who are outstanding (περιττοί) in philosophy, statesmanship, poetry, or arts', and lists as examples Herakles, Lysander, Ajax, Bellerophon, Empedokles, Plato, and Sokrates (953a14-29). The author goes on to talk of the variety of mixtures within the constitutions of those who are melancholic, which produce in them a variety of effects, mental and physical. He concludes (955a36-40) that all melancholics are by nature 'outstanding' (περιττοί). Plutarch seems to have interpreted this passage as a restatement of the doctrine of 'great natures', and to have taken περιττός (exceptional, outstanding, even abnormal) as a synonym for 'great nature'. Some men, by virtue of their natural constitution, are exceptional in their intellect and capacity. This may lead to great good, as in the case of Plato or Sokrates, or to fits of madness, as in the cases of Ajax or Herakles. By referring us to this passage in the *Problems*, Plutarch is able to associate Lysander with three of the greatest figures of the Greek past, Sokrates, Plato, and Herakles, and to relate his worst trait to his having, like them, a 'great nature'[27].

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[26] Seen particularly in the *On moral virtue*.

[27] On *Problems* 30.1, see KLIBANSKY, PANOFSKY, and SAXL, 1964, pp. 18-41; PADEL, 1995, pp. 55-57. *Cf. Post. an.* II.13 (97b15-25), where Alkibiades, Achilles, Ajax, Lysander, and Sokrates are suggested hypothetically as examples of 'greatness of soul' (μεγαλοψυχία): the first three are characterised by 'intolerance of dishonour', and the second two by 'being unaffected by good and bad fortune'.

Lysander, then, had great potential, but this potential was perverted by, it seems, his poor education and environment. As in the case of Demetrios and Antony, and of Coriolanus and Alkibiades, the same traits which make Lysander great are also those that become so destructive to both him and his country: ambition, the ability to flatter, his insensibility to money. He, like them and like Plato's Alkibiades, is not presented simply as evil, but as a paradigm for the dangers of greatness[28].

Similar could be said about Pyrrhos and Marius. Plutarch never states that they are to be regarded as 'great natures' gone wrong, but this is almost certainly the case. Both men have great natural endowments and indeed accomplish great military successes, but their characters are perverted through a bad environment and bad education. This is clearest in the case of Marius. Plutarch goes to great lengths to point out the inadequacy of his education, an inadequacy both symbolised by, and partly at least consisting in, his explicit refusal to learn Greek. As Plutarch puts it at the start of the Life:

> "If anyone had persuaded Marius to sacrifice to the Greek Muses and Graces, he would not have put a most ugly ending on to his most illustrious career as general and politician, when he ran himself aground on a most premature and savage old age under the influence of passion, an untimely love of office and uncontrollable greeds. These things should be immediately discernible in his actual deeds". (*Mar.* 2.2-4)

As the last sentence makes clear, Marius' poor education is to be seen as the cause of his later failings. The message is clear, and, for Plutarch, unsurprising: lack of education and reason in the soul leads to greed, excessive ambition and, ultimately, disaster. It is not surprising, then, that we find that, like Coriolanus, Marius does not know how to act in peace time or politics, a danger which Plutarch saw as facing all successful generals after their time of office (*Pomp.* 23.5-6)[29]. As with Coriolanus, Marius' potential is not fully realised, but translated into virtue in only one sphere of his character: the military. He achieves tremendous successes, but is plagued by discontent and will end his life feeling unfulfilled, 'claiming that he was dying in want before his time and had not completed what he desired' (*Mar.* 45.11-12)[30].

Marius is, then, surely to be regarded as a man of 'great nature' of a similar ilk to Demetrios and Antony, and Coriolanus and Alkibiades. He is a great man, but one who received inadequate education and whose greatness manifests itself in

[28] On the character traits of Plutarch's Lysander and Sulla, see PELLING, 1988a, pp. 268-274; STADTER 1992; DUFF, 1997, 161-204

[29] E.g. *Cor.* 1.4; 15.4-7; *Mar.* 6.3; 28.1-5; 32.2; *Pomp.* 46.1-4. See WARDMAN, 1974, pp. 93-100; HILLMAN, 1992, pp. 128-135.

[30] For a fuller discussion of the *Pyrrhos - Marius*, and the strong parallels with the *On tranquillity of mind*, see DUFF, 1999, esp. pp. 103-111.

vices as well as virtues. Pyrrhos is probably also to be regarded in a similar way. As so often in Plutarch's Lives, Plutarch does not subject the education of the Greek subject to the same degree of scrutiny as he does the Roman[31]. But he does make the point that Pyrrhos' education was purely military (*Pyrrh.* 8.3-7; *Marius* 2.1), and he certainly functions, like Marius, as an example of discontent. Similar remarks might also be made about Philopoimen and Flamininus, two other men of slightly dubious moral status, whose education is also purely military (*Phil.* 3.1-5; *Flam.* 1.4). Once again, both men achieve great things, but their educational deficiency leads to their most serious character weakness, an excessive competitiveness (see esp. *Phil.-Flam.* 1.4)[32].

'Great natures' and the Plutarchan corpus

We have seen, then, that Plutarch introduces explicitly the Platonic doctrine of 'great natures' in the cases of Demetrios and Antony, Coriolanus and Alkibiades, and Lysander. We may assume, furthermore, that he saw Pyrrhos and Marius, Sulla, and possibly Philopoimen and Flamininus in the same way[33]. How then does an understanding of Plato's theory of 'great natures' affect our reading of these Lives, and of the *corpus* of *Parallel Lives* in general? The doctrine certainly implies the inherent greatness of the subjects of these rather negative Lives. These men are presented by Plutarch as having great natural potential, albeit potential which was perverted through a bad environment. Indeed, Plutarch stresses throughout all these Lives the great achievements and the great abilities of the subjects. But more than that the doctrine suggests a less completely negative way of viewing their vice. Plutarch appears in all these Lives to find much to approve of: in particular the generalship and military prowess of the subjects, their powers of endurance, their personal bravery, their political skill, and, in the cases of Lysander and Coriolanus, their financial incorruptibility. These men are, then, in Plutarch's view, not totally nor innately either evil or worthless. Indeed, when one reads on in the *Demetrios - Antony*, the pair with which we began, it becomes difficult to see the subjects as simply bad men. As Christopher Pelling has demonstrated, the *Antony* does not seem in practice to be wholly negative[34]. In the early chapters of the *Antony* there are, it is true, a number of instances where the narrative is couched in terms of moral evaluation. Later in the Life, however, particularly after the introduction of

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31 For bibliography on this topic, see n. 11.

32 See PELLING, 1997, 125-135.

33 Possibly also Nikias and Crassus. See above n. 2

34 PELLING, 1980, p. 138; *idem*, 1988b, pp. 10-18.

Kleopatra (*Ant.* 25.1), the tone of praise and blame fades. The interest is in the fall of a great man and the traits which lead to it; by the end, the reader's sympathy lies wholly with Antony and Kleopatra, caught up in the pathos of their fall. The impression is one of tragedy - a great man is ruined by the very qualities which made him great. The reader watches helplessly as the hero unwittingly works his own downfall. Antony is not simply a bad man -a fact which is all the more striking, given the possibilities which Antony's association with Kleopatra provided for the presentation of a simple moral paradigm.

The *Demetrios - Antony*, then, is not wholly negative. Its subjects are, like the other men introduced as 'great natures', men of great natural potential, whose potential is perverted by their environment and by their own weaknesses. Indeed, even poor education, while damaging and regrettable is not necessarily a point of blame - unless, of course, it is caused by a stubborn refusal to learn, as in the case of Marius (see above) and Cato the Elder (*Cato Ma.* 23.1-3). Plutarch seems to imply this when he explains that Coriolanus' purely military education was the norm at Rome's early stage in its development; at that time, he says (1.6), military prowess was indeed equated with virtue - witness, he argues, the Latin word *virtus*, which really meant only manliness (ἀνδρεία). Similarly, he explains that Lysander 'should not be blamed too much' for his great ambition and competitiveness, because it was instilled in him by his Spartan education (2.4). Though unfortunate, his defective education did not make him wholly bad. Similarly, when Plutarch discusses the defective education of another Spartan, Kleomenes III, this time a Stoic education which had the effect of 'kindling his love of honour' (φιλοτιμία), he comments: 'Stoic doctrine is somewhat dangerous and risky for great and sharp natures (πρὸς τὰς μεγάλας φύσεις καὶ ὀξείας), but when mixed with a deep and gentle character it contributes most to its proper good' (*Agis/Kleom.* 23[2].6). Plutarch seems to imply that Stoicism could be a dangerous influence on men of 'great nature' who had not yet developed an abiding character - though this was not, in fact, as he points out, the case with Kleomenes. The wrong sort of education can be very damaging, but does not make its recipients wholly evil[35].

So Demetrios and Antony, like the less virtuous subjects of other Lives, are not

[35] It may well be that Plutarch's picture of the Stoic Cato Minor, who resolutely refused, unlike Phokion, the subject of the paired Life, to compromise his principles when politically necessary, is intended to convey something of the dangers of Stoicism. See BABUT, 1969, pp. 169-175. Cato is not a bad man, certainly not an exemplar of vice, but his moral status is rather dubious, and he may well have been regarded by Plutarch as a 'great nature' gone wrong - a potentially good man who does not quite live up to his promise. See DUFF, 1999, pp. 131-160, esp. 155-158.

to be seen as purely negative examples. They are 'great natures' who have not fulfilled their potential, and indeed use their natural qualities for ill. But they are not simply paradigms of evil. This refusal to categorise as simply evil must, partly at least, be a result of Plutarch's desire to seem humane (φιλάνθρωπος) rather than malicious, a desire given its most explicit expression in the *Lives* in the prologue to the *Kimon - Lucullus*. Here Plutarch declares that no man's life is blameless or pure (ἀμεμφῆ καὶ καθαρὸν). Mistakes (ἁμαρτίας) or defects which occur in a man's life - whether through passion or 'political necessity' (πολιτικῆς ἀνάγκης) - he will regard as 'shortcomings in a particular virtue rather than the wickednesses of vice' (ἐλλείματα μᾶλλον ἀρετῆς τινος ἢ κακίας πονηρεύματα). These mistakes, he says, will not be delineated too clearly, 'as though out of respect for human nature, since it cannot produce anything absolutely good, nor any character which is indisputably turned to virtue' (*Kimon* 2.3-5; *cf. Herod. mal.* 855c-856d). The conception of vice as a 'shortcoming in virtue', which arises from Plutarch's own desire to present himself as humane, to avoid the charge of κακοήθεια which he heaps upon Herodotos in the *On the Malice of Herodotos*, is an underlying brake on the impulse to condemn vice which other programmatic statements had seemed to imply[36]. Even in Plutarch's most negative Lives, he find much to commend.

But the reason for Plutarch's invocation of the doctrine of 'great natures' cannot be just his reluctance to condemn. For just as an explicitly 'bad example' is not wholly bad, so the 'good examples', men like Perikles and Alexander, appear not wholly good - as indeed Plutarch hints at in the *Kimon - Lucullus* prologue. Even in the *Perikles* and *Alexander*, where Plutarch is particularly favourable to the protagonist, there is still implicit criticism[37]. Thus Perikles, whose Life opens with Plutarch's famous disquisition on the importance of imitation and who receives one of the most positive treatments of all Plutarch's protagonists, appears to fail morally on several occasions, in particular in his handling of the dispute with Megara (*Per.* 30.1-32.6)[38]. Similarly, the Alexander of Plutarch's Life is not simply the champion of Greek culture and education (παιδεία), the ideal philosopher-king, as he is in the speeches *On the fortune or virtue of Alexander*[39]. A dark side, often signalled by tragic associations, coexists alongside the more positive and more usual

36 See MARTIN, 1995. *Cf. Nik.-Crass.* 1.4, where vice is described as 'a sort of inequality and incongruity of character' (ἀνωμαλίαν εἶναί τινα τρόπου καὶ ἀνομολογίαν).

37 PICCIRILLI, 1989; *idem*, 1990a, pp. xxxi-xxxii.

38 MARTIN, 1995, pp. 15-16.

39 *Cf.* HUMBERT, 1991, pp. 175-181.

40 On the two sides of Alexander in Plutarch's *Life*, see WARDMAN, 1955, pp. 100-107; MOSSMAN, 1988.

Greek presentation of Alexander as the epitome of all things Hellenic[40].

Few, then, of Plutarch's subjects are wholly good or wholly bad. This partly explains the difficulties of modern commentators in trying to decide whether Nikias and Crassus, for example, are to be seen as 'good' or 'bad' examples (see above). In reality, Plutarch's conception of the world is not one of comfortably black or white characters, but a more subtle and complex one. The difference between, on the one hand, the majority of Lives, the 'good' ones, and, on the other, the smaller number of more negative Lives is a difference of degree. It might here be significant that, in speaking of this difference in the *Demetrios - Antony* prologue, Plutarch uses the comparative, speaking of the readers' imitation not of the 'good' lives, but of the 'better' ones (τῶν βελτιόνων...βίων). All have some good in them. The subjects of all Plutarch's *Lives* are to be credited, we must assume, with 'great natures', that is with great natural endowments, great abilities. The subjects of the more negative Lives, though great men, do not, however, live up to their potential. These men are not wholly good, nor wholly bad. Rather they are, like most of us, a mixture, a compound of great potential and of the lost opportunities which life brings -a conception of humanity which Plutarch's Platonism would have found acceptable.

It is interesting to note that those Lives whose subjects are presented as having 'great natures' which were perverted or at least not properly nourished by their environment, seem to have been written towards the end of Plutarch's period of composition[41]. It is surely also no coincidence that the majority of these challenging pairs of Lives, whose subjects have something of the 'great nature' turned bad in them, are of men who lived outside of what Plutarch would have considered the golden age of their countries, in ages in which he considered the exercise of virtue to be more difficult or the temptations of power particularly great. Lysander was a proto-Hellenistic king; Pyrrhos and Demetrios the real thing; Antony was drawn into the decadent world of the Hellenistic monarchies. Plutarch considered Hellenistic kings particularly vulnerable to the temptations of over-confidence and

41 That is, the *Cor.-Alk.*, *Demetr.-Ant.*, and *Pyrrh.-Mar.* The *Phok.-Cato Mi.* (see above, n. 35) and *Nik.-Crass.* are also rather later. The *Phil.-Flam.*, another pair which has been noted for its negative elements, is difficult to date (though *cf.* PELLING, 1997, 87-90). The exception seems to be the *Lys.-Sulla*, dated to before AD 114 by a reference to the Battle of Orchomenos (86 BC) as having taken place 'almost two hundred years' earlier (*Sull.* 21.8), and placed by cross-references (*Lys.* 17.11; *Per.* 22.4) to between the seventh and ninth pair in order of composition. The link between more negative Lives and late composition was noted by ANDREI, 1989, p. 39; PICCIRILLI, 1990a, pp. xxix-xxxiv; STADTER, 1992, pp. 48-51. For the chronology, see JONES, 1966, pp. 66-68; PICCIRILLI, 1977, pp. 999-1004; *idem*, 1980, pp. 1753-1755.

42 E.g. *Arist.* 6.1-5; *Demetr.* 10.2-13.3; 25.6-8; *Agis/Kleom.* 34 (13).2-3; 37(16).7; *Alex. fort. virt.* 338a-c; *Tranq. an.* 470b; *Ad princ. inerud.* 799f-780b.

hybris[42]. Sulla and Marius lived in the age when Roman commanders were obtaining exceptional personal power: it is not hard to see why Plutarch paired these men with their Hellenistic counterparts. Phokion and Cato, if it makes sense to talk of them here, both witness the death-throws of their own states, periods which Plutarch admits were antipathetic to the exercise of virtue (*Phok.* 1-3). Coriolanus dates from an early period of Roman history before the arrival of civilising Greek influence (*Cor.* 1.6); his incomplete education and moral degeneracy are not surprising[43]. Only Alkibiades comes from the Classical age of his country, and Plutarch shows how unique and unpredictable he was, even to his own contemporaries[44].

It may well be, then, that in writing the *Lives*, Plutarch gravitated first to those figures which lent themselves to a rather positive treatment, but became aware, as his writing progressed, that he would be forced to write about men drawn from periods in which he considered the exercise of virtue to be difficult or problematic, and whose careers would call for a rather different approach[45]. Be that as it may, Plutarch has succeeded in these problematic Lives in providing the reader with material for more subtle, less reassuring, but more searching and challenging moral reflection. Indeed it is in several of these very Lives that Christopher Pelling has seen a 'descriptive' (as opposed to a 'protreptic') moralism, a moralism that raises moral issues without attempting to guide conduct[46]. Plutarch raises in these Lives moral issues, without providing clear-cut answers. How should one react to a heroic and romantic figure like Antony? How does the pathos of his death, his very real and passionate love for Kleopatra, effect a moral reading of his life? What is the relationship between the strict demands of morality and the interests of the state? Lysander, Sulla, and Alkibiades all appear to break moral codes in order to serve their country. Sulla is more successful than Lysander because of his use of greater violence; the Athenian people do not know how to judge Alkibiades, whose very bad points -his versatility and ability to flatter- win victories for Athens. Coriolanus is a great man, whose lack of education was a result of Rome's early stage of development, and who fought bravely for his country. In these problematic *Lives* we see Plutarch at his best: not preaching, but gently questioning the conventional boundaries between right and wrong. Moralism is a major feature of many of the *Lives*, and

43 Plutarch seems to have dated the beginning of significant Hellenic influence to the sack of Syracuse in 211 BC (e.g. *Marc.* 21.7). See SWAIN, 1990, pp. 131-132

44 Nikias, Crassus and Philopoimen all experience particularly stressful circumstances (*cf. Nik.* 1.5, reading <ἀπο>καλυπτομένην): Nikias and Crassus are both involved in great disasters (see *Nik.* 1.1); Philopoimen loses the battle to keep Greece free of Roman domination.

45 *Cf.* BRENK, 1992, p. 4381.

46 PELLING, 1988a, p. 274; *idem*, 1988b, pp. 15-16.

provides the explicit *raison d' être* of the corpus. But in the Lives of 'great natures' gone wrong, it is a particularly challenging and satisfying moralism.

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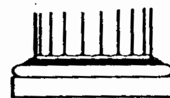
Aurelio Pérez Jiménez, José García López & Rosa Mª Aguilar
Editores

Plutarco, Platón y Aristóteles

Actas del V Congreso Internacional de la I.P.S. (Madrid-Cuenca, 4-7 de Mayo de 1999)

Madrid
1999

Ediciones  Clásicas