Since it is difficult, or rather perhaps impossible, to display a man's life as pure and blameless, we should fill out the truth to give a likeness where the good points lie, but regard the errors and follies with which emotion or political necessity sullies a career as deficiencies in some virtue rather than displays of viciousness, and therefore not make any special effort to draw attention to them in the record. Our attitude should be one of modest shame on behalf of human nature, which never produces unmixed good or a character of undisputed excellence.[83]

Our brief look at Plutarch's learning and its uses and methods may appropriately rest here. His style, even more than his scholarly apparatus, reveals his vast and catholic reading. In the scales of his honest criticism, the truths of morality weigh very heavy; probability and consistency are important criteria, and he often seems to give less than due weight to what appears to be the crucial fact. He is moreover, like most ancient historians, a trained rhetorician, and perhaps subtler than he is sometimes thought. He would claim to put this skill also at the service of morality. In his own fashion, he is *vir bonus dicendi peritus*. Consistent attitudes and methods run right through his work. We have seen them in relation to poetry and history; we shall see them also when we look at the professed work of his life, his philosophy.

[38] *Cimon* 2. 4–5.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Philosopher and his Religion

PLUTARCH was a declared and consistent Platonist, even if he was not in all respects in agreement with the orthodoxy of the school.

In his youth, the Stoics were the leading sect, the allegiance one would think of first when a man described himself as a philosopher. It was the age of Seneca, Epictetus and the influential group of first-century Roman Stoics. By the end of Plutarch's life, however, the picture, seen in these very simple colours, had changed. The philosopher *par excellence* was now a *Platonicus*. Stoicism still had its great exponents, even a Marcus Aurelius; but in the second and third centuries, new and developing forms of Platonism came to overshadow every other adherence. Where there was open conflict and open compromise between Christian thinkers and their pagan opponents, it was with the Platonists. No one else mattered.

The reasons for this movement towards Platonism are complex and not clearly known. But there is one comparatively superficial factor which needs to be stressed. Plato, alone among the founders of schools, was a literary classic. Aristotle's 'golden fluency',[1] though admired, made a thin claim compared with his master's treasures of pure Attic. This was an important point in an age which consciously looked to a rather remote past, and saw it mainly through the medium of its literary patrimony. Not that the Atticists admired Plato's style without reservation. There was

[1] Cicero, *Academica* 2.119.

a strong tradition of disapproval of its more poetic and 'dithyrambic' features. Dionysius complained of the hocus-pocus in Plato's grand style; 'Longinus', with his more baroque taste, defended precisely the grandeur and metaphorical richness. In any case, however, Plato was a storehouse of the older language, and his text invited interpretation from grammarian and philosopher alike.

And certainly philosophy, as Plutarch knew it, was a scholarly business, much concerned with the interpretation of texts. Here, as in history, there were *problēmata* and differences between authorities to be reconciled. The classical philosophers, like the classical poets, did not always mean what they seemed on the surface to say. In handling all this, Plutarch shows once again the verbal sophistication in argument, the reliance on *eikos*, the certainty about moral principles, which his work in other fields reveals. With Plato, as with Hesiod or Herodotus, his scholarship sometimes disconcerts by its aridity and apparent frivolity. What for instance are we to make of the 'Platonic' interpretation of the Delphic E? Plutarch is speaking[2] in the dialogue *The Delphic 'E'* in his own person, even though he does represent himself as a young man; he is working out the consequences of believing the mysterious E to be the numeral five, and he naturally draws on the sort of number-symbolism that we associate mainly with the Pythagoreans. He goes on to find fives in Plato: the 'first principles' of *Sophist* 256C, Being, The Same, The Other, Movement, Rest; the four principles of *Philebus* 23C, Infinite, Finite, Becoming, Cause of Combination—made up to five by adding Cause of Dissolution; the five categories of the Good in *Philebus* 66A. There have been ages in which this kind of interpretation of a religious symbol would have been taken in earnest; but it can hardly be so with Plutarch, and his accumulation of alternatives perhaps itself gives the clue. This is mock-metaphysics, or at most an ambivalent game between earnest and parody. One thinks not only of Plato but of Sir Thomas Browne's quincunxes and the Cambridge Platonists.

[2] 391A; cf. 428B.

However, the tone of Plutarch's more important pieces of Platonic interpretation is grave enough, and they have a serious bearing on his deeper convictions. The most substantial extant piece is the lengthy discussion (1012A) of the account Plato gives in *Timaeus* 35A of the creation of the 'world-soul'. This is complicated and mathematical; but it touches some central points in Plutarch's thinking. He held the unusual view, shared notably by Atticus, an influential Platonist of the later second century who may derive it from Plutarch himself, that Plato meant the creation of the kosmos in the *Timaeus* literally. The world really was created in time, and the story of its making was not, as most Platonists held, a symbolic analysis of an eternally-existing order. Plutarch's ostensible reason for believing this is the scholarly one of making Plato self-consistent (1013E). He complains of his predecessors that they are more concerned to make the philosopher say acceptable things than to reconcile him with himself. Without creation in time, he thinks, the 'priority' or 'seniority' of the soul, and its activity as the initiator of change and movement, on which Plato insists elsewhere, would be empty of meaning. In his own view, what existed before the kosmos was *akosmia*, 'disorder', and this involved both body or matter (*sōma*) and mind or soul (*psuchē*). The *psuchē* which was responsible for movement in the *akosmia* was disordered and did not possess reason. Now Plato spoke of a *psuchē* which was disordered and productive of evil also in the *Laws* (896D), and Plutarch equates this with the disordered *psuchē* of the pre-cosmic confusion. To this and not to matter is to be assigned the cause of evil in the world. Plato, he argues (1014F), could not have regarded matter as the cause of evil and also spoken of it[3] as without quality and comparable to the odourless oils which perfumers use as the base of their products.

This intricate interpretation has features very typical of ancient philosophical schools. Emphasis on the self-consistency of one's own view and the self-contradictions of others is one such feature; it is a natural consequence of the polemical study of texts. Typical

[3] *Timaeus* 50E.

too is the report of earlier opinions, *doxai*, with which Plutarch begins. This a regular feature in philosophical writing from Aristotle onwards. Plutarch gives us another good example of it in the opening chapters of *Moral Virtue*, and one of the great extant collections of *doxai* is preserved in the corpus of his works, though it shows no internal evidence of being his doing, and its connection with him must remain uncertain.

But the significance of the *Timaeus* commentary goes beyond that of scholastic debate. The interpretation Plutarch seeks is not just one that holds water and satisfies the texts, but one which will accord with his own convictions about the good and evil in the world. He seems always to have kept in mind, as something of central importance, the belief that disorder and evil are of psychic, not material origin. There are, for him, 'evil souls' at work, and our ability to change the world or ourselves for better is limited by their existence and depends on our recognition of it. He worried about these problems all his life.

Now allegiance to Plato implied a certain measure of hostility to other sects. Of course, philosophers generally agreed against the outside world, especially in matters of morals; but the basic differences of principle between the sects were real enough, and amply sufficed to create and perpetuate rivalries and dislike, in somewhat the same way as sectarian differences in Christianity. That there was not much bloodshed among philosophers is presumably due to the fact that these things were the preoccupation of a minority who did not often succeed in inflaming the mob. 'Christians out! Epicureans out!' shouts the hostile crowd in Lucian's *Alexander* (38). Plutarch is not likely to have heard this sinister noise; it belongs to the world of mass-movements which he viewed from a distance.

Even in Plutarch, however, polemic sometimes descends to personalities. When an Epicurean appears in a dialogue (548A), it is to vanish in a huff and leave his hearers staring. The eccentric Cynic Didymus in *The Decline of Oracles* is a comic figure (413A). He strikes the ground with his stick, opines that the oracle ought to have packed up long ago because of the silly

questions people ask, and finally goes off in dudgeon without speaking. It is of course difficult to measure dislike. In all ancient literature we have to do with a pervasive tradition of exaggerated invective, which spread from litigation and politics into the world of learning and science. It is tempting to put down all Plutarch's fulminations and innuendos as meaningless convention.

But it would be wrong, just as it would be wrong to regard *Herodotus' Malice* as a mere exercise by an author uncommitted to any underlying principle. Plutarch is in earnest. Not only did he think of Stoics and Epicureans as professional rivals, proper objects for the rudeness of controversy; he regarded them as fundamentally wrong, and their teaching as pernicious. And this indignation sprang from the integrated set of religious and moral convictions which he held.

Epicureanism had had a great history. A century or so earlier, it had passed through a phase when it was both fashionable and influential in the Roman world: the age of Lucretius and Caesar. The receding tide left a collection of moral topics on which even opponents drew freely. The *Moral Letters* of the Stoic Seneca were to some extent modelled on Epicurus', whose *gnōmai* he often quotes. In *Superstition* (164E) Plutarch repeatedly reminds us of Lucretius; they had a common inspiration in Epicurean writing. Nevertheless, the refutation of the atomism and the hedonism was for Plutarch in the main a standard academic exercise. It had a pedagogic function. The arguments were well established, the young student could master them and improve them in detail as he would an anecdote or a comparison at his rhetor's school, and he was stimulated by the thought that he was breaking a lance in defence of the approved values of religion and morality.

Three of Plutarch's anti-Epicurean works survive. Four or five other titles are known. One of the extant pieces (1128), a declamation making play with Epicurus' advice to 'live unnoticed', shows how a philosophical topic can be handled with a purely rhetorical technique. The other two are more substantial. Both take their subject from a book by an immediate disciple of

Epicurus, Colotes, who had argued that the doctrines of all non-Epicureans 'make even life impossible'—i.e. not only are they fallacious but they prevent the ordinary activities of humanity. The first of Plutarch's answers (1107D) to this three-centuries-old charge consists of a review of the interpretations of philosophers that Colotes gave; it is an informative and eloquent book. Its companion-piece (1086C), formally a dialogue but virtually a monologue spoken by Theon, turns the tables on the Epicureans by arguing that their precepts, quite apart from their other weaknesses, do not 'even' allow us a 'pleasant' life—which of course Epicurus and his followers regarded as the whole and only good.

There are also anti-Stoic writings, and at first sight they present a strikingly similar picture:[4] three extant polemics (1033A–1086B), the titles of six more. Of the surviving works, one is a treatise, one a declamation, one a very undramatic dialogue on 'common notions'. The declamation takes the theme that Stoic paradoxes are stranger than the poets' fictions. The treatise pertinaciously hunts contradictions in the texts of a philosophy which, after all, made much of 'living consistently'. It was evidently the companion-piece of the lost *Contradictions of the Epicureans*; we observe again how large a part attack on, and defence of, apparent inconsistencies played in all these scholastic debates.

The Stoics, however, were much more worthwhile and serious adversaries in Plutarch's eyes than the Epicureans. Not only these formal polemics, but certain other works are directed against their views. *Moral Virtue* (440D) and *Progress in Virtue* (75A) are the most notable of these, but the books on animal psychology —*The Intelligence of Animals* (959A) and *Gryllus* (985D)—are also by implication anti-Stoic, since Plutarch held that animals also had *logos* and man was not unique in this: a theme related to the vegetarianism to which he seems to have been attracted.[5] More than this, the anti-Stoic tone is often recognisable where any topic occurs to which it might be relevant. It is modified only by admiration for Stoic achievements and heroism, as in the encomiastic life of the younger Cato, where Plutarch enters into the spirit of the extremely laudatory narratives that he follows. The debate between the Academy and the Stoa took shape in the third century B.C., and these old controversies still provide the fuel for Plutarch's arguments; but the reason why the fire burned so brightly lies, once again, in its relevance to his own general convictions. He sees in Stoicism something fundamentally hostile to his ethical belief in the value of kindness and humanity, and to that sense of human frailty and cosmic imperfection in which he reminds us of the classic attitudes of early Greece, the modest confidence and tempered pessimism of a Herodotus or a Sophocles.

[4] See in general D. Babut, *Plutarque et le stoïcisme*, Paris 1969.

[5] See especially the two speeches on meat-eating, 993A–999B.

Plutarch was thus a traditionalist in his philosophy, as in much else; an expert in the debates of the schools; a convinced Platonist; and a serious person who had no intention of putting his life and his theories into separate compartments. At least, this is the *persona*; wherever we look in his works, it is maintained with remarkable consistency. We should perhaps allow ourselves to believe that it is the man himself.

The centre of gravity of Plutarch's philosophy lay in ethics. Physical science and theology subserved moral ends, as they usually do in Hellenistic thought. But he did not neglect them. Neither did Seneca, who wrote his elaborate *Natural Questions* at a time when he was also delving deeply into moral theory and problems.

The moral orientation of Plutarch's science is well seen in the elaborate and famous dialogue, *The Face in the Moon*.[6]

The setting is curious. Lamprias, Plutarch's brother, relates a conversation with some friends in which he and one Lucius, a pupil of the well-known Pythagorean Moderatus of Gades, report an earlier discussion in their circle about the nature of the moon. They do this, apparently, in order to give Sextius Sulla a chance to tell an extraordinary story he has picked up from a

[6] H. Cherniss gives an excellent edition in the Loeb *Moralia*, vol. XII; see also S. Sambursky, *The Physical World of the Greeks*, 204 ff.

traveller recently returned to Carthage from an adventure in the Atlantic. The beginning of the dialogue is missing, but the essential point about Sulla's promised myth is clear. Ostensibly, the subject is to be the 'face' seen in the moon. In fact, the first part of the book is an application of arguments from physics and optics not only to this point but to general questions about the moon's nature. Peripatetic and Stoic theories are expounded. Clearchus' idea that the 'face' is a reflection of the terrestrial Ocean is praised as showing his boldness and elegance. The main effort is once again directed against the Stoics. Their representative is Pharnaces: unknown, not very clearly characterised and treated as something of a butt, but not necessarily a figment. The Stoics held that the moon was composed of air and fire; Plutarch, as a Platonist, that its substance is earth. He sets out to show that the Stoics are not consistent with themselves. The fire they posit could not exist without solid material (922A). Certain humorous allegorists indeed saw this, he tells us, when they made Hephaestus' lameness and inability to walk without a wooden stick a symbol of the inability of fire to gain ground without fuel. Plutarch's 'humorists' are clearly Stoic, and their humour unintentional. Indeed, the extant first-century Stoic allegorists, Cornutus and 'Heraclitus', both report the interpretation—Cornutus (18) in similar words (*probainein* for 'walk'). Again (922, 930), the Stoics held that light alters air from dark to light in an instant, as we see at the sunrise; why then is the moon not evenly illuminated all over? Its shadows, and indeed its phases, become inexplicable. Moreover (933D), if it is air and fire, surely it should be invisible when it shines against the bright background of the surrounding *aither*, not, as it is, when it is darkened and eclipsed. Worst of all (925 ff.), the Stoics held the doctrine of 'natural place', according to which the elements tend to a particular level, with earth at rest in the centre. This leads them into various difficulties. The universe cannot be infinite, for then it would have no centre. The Stoic fire-soul and pantheist immanent God would be impossible; they would be fire in the wrong places. There would be no use for providence either, for

the places of the elements would be determined—whereas in fact Stoicism lays great stress on providence and teleology, and on things being in the 'best' place, not only in the human body but in the *kosmos* itself, seen as a vast organism. 'Everywhere, the principle of the greater good is more important than that of necessity' (928C). The debating points are shrewd. Plutarch deploys his knowledge of physics and optics efficiently to make his case. But it all remains in the familiar vein of controversial scoring—at least until the play with paradoxes passes over into the talk of providence and teleology, and the larger issues bring with them the warmer style of moral concern and protreptic.

Lamprias' speech (934A ff.), however, develops a more positive view of the phenomena. In the course of it, we find him (934C ff.) drawing attention to the different colours visible during a lunar eclipse—something which also interested the astrologers—and coming to the conclusion that the dark, earthy colour is the moon's own, while the rest are due to the light all round her. There follows a passage of characteristic fantasy:

> Seeing that here on earth places shaded by purple and red awnings take up colour from them and glow with it, when they are next to pools or rivers open to the sun, giving off many different radiations because of the reflections, is it to be wondered at if a huge stream of shadow pouring into a heavenly ocean, as it were, of moving, restless light, shot through by innumerable stars and receiving all kinds of combinations and changes of colour, should soak up various tints from the moon and reproduce them here? A star or a fire would not appear grey or dark blue in shadow, whereas over mountains, plains and seas there flit many kinds of colours from the sun, and its brilliance induces in the shadows and mists with which it mingles tints like those produced in a painter's colours. Homer has endeavoured to give a name somehow to the tints of the sea: he speaks of 'wine-dark deep', 'purple wave', 'grey sea', 'white calm'. But he neglects—as being infinite in number—the diversities of constantly changing colours that are found on the earth. Now the moon, in all probability, does not have a single plane surface like the sea, but resembles in its structure the earth that old Socrates described in his myth—whether he meant our earth by his enigmatic description or some other. There is nothing incredible or extraordinary

in the notion that the moon, who has nothing corrupt or sordid in her, but gathers pure light from heaven and is full of a heat that is not burning nor furious but liquid, innocuous and natural, may possess marvellously beautiful places, flaming mountains, zones of purple, gold and silver not scattered sparsely in her depths but breaking out in abundance on her plains and visible on her smooth uplands. (934D–935A)

This kind of description, in which Plutarch strains language to convey marvellous effects of light and colour, recurs in two of the great 'underworld myths' which he composed on Platonic models (563B ff., 589F ff.). The idea of the wonderful lights is part of the imaginative legacy of astronomy, easily carried over to the language of religious vision. But the special care for colour seems peculiar to Plutarch, who evidently had an eye for it and an interest in the problem of expressing it verbally. The reference to Homer is striking; here is another scrap of commentator's learning serving a new purpose.

But it is not only the colour that makes Lamprias' moon so strange. Imagination is leaving scientific theory behind. The 'probability' (*eikos*) about the moon's nature comes from the myth of Plato's *Phaedo*, which describes the splendours of the 'true earth', evidently a symbol of the world of 'forms'. Plutarch builds on the imagery of that grandiose vision. He interprets it as *possibly* a parable of the moon; but Lamprias is a good Academic, and cannot be dogmatic about it.

The passage from science to fantasy should not be misinterpreted. It is to miss the tone and purpose of the dialogue to detect a clash between the clarity and acumen of the preceding arguments on astrophysics and the moon-mythology that begins hereabouts. Both science and religious myth belong to the same range of elevated 'cosmic' subjects. They demand elaboration and magnificence, not bare factual statement. Plato set the pattern in the *Timaeus*. Plutarch's knowledge of Hellenistic science enlarged the material for his metaphysical and moralising fantasy, it did not give him the objective tone of the modern physicist.

And as we read on, the mythical predominates more and more.

Is the moon inhabited? Theon suggests that moon-men would fall off, be burnt up, have no nourishment. Lamprias replies in detail. It is no proof, he says, to say that an uninhabited moon would serve no purpose in the universe. After all, parts of the earth are desert. But in fact the moon may have inhabitants; the smooth rotation would hold them on, there may be plants and trees that need no rain or snow, she may have cooling and softening qualities herself. If there are living creatures on her, we cannot indeed imagine them—but this does not mean they do not exist. Here come more Platonic touches:

Indeed, they may be much more amazed at the earth, when they see that sediment and muddy residue of the universe appearing amid its damps and mists and clouds, a low, unlit, unmoving spot. Can it, they may wonder, really produce and nourish living things possessed of movement, respiration and warmth? (940E)

Sulla too is concerned with the inhabitants of the moon. His story, long awaited, proves indeed a remarkable one, in which Plutarch has woven together several traditional themes. One is the myth of the imprisonment of Kronos on a distant island in the far west. There are echoes here of Plato's Atlantis, but also of other tales that grew up in the period when Britain and the remoter west of Europe were a favoured setting for utopian romance.[7] Another common motif of fantasy, the discovery of sacred books, is also alluded to, but not used in a way at all integral to the story.[8] Essentially, the tale is one of personal revelation: the 'servants of Kronos' disclose religious truths to the traveller.

What they tell symbolises an elaborate psychological doctrine. Body, *psuchē* and *nous* (intelligence) are three separate things, even more distinct than the three 'parts' of Plato's *psuchē*. There are two deaths: one, the separation of body from the rest, which takes place on earth; the other, the separation of *nous* from *psuchē*,

[7] e.g. the first-century novel of Antonius Diogenes, *Wonders Beyond Thule*, known from Photius, cod. 166.

[8] On this, see W. Speyer, *Bücherfunde in der Glaubenswerbung der Antike*, Göttingen 1970.

which takes place on the moon after a lengthy period of purification and awaiting. For as the soul ascends after its first death, it wanders and undergoes punishment in the atmosphere between earth and moon. The length of time it spends here, in 'the meadows of Hades', depends on its moral condition. Arrival on the moon brings joy, fright, hope: a bewildering excitement like that of initiation into the mysteries. The moon is therefore inhabited by beings who have got thus far; these are *daimones*, and they are still liable to suffer for wrongs done and to be sent down to earth to look after oracles, punish wrongdoers, and protect men in battle or at sea. One day, however, 'love for the image of the sun' may procure their further release; *nous* then escapes from *psuchē*, who then stays dreaming on the moon until she is ultimately accepted and assimilated by her, as the body is by earth. There is a reverse process too: the sun 'sows' *nous* on the moon, and she forms *psuchai* with it; these pass to earth and there receive bodies. The moon therefore is the only part of the universe that both receives and takes; she is the essential middle stage in the whole process of generation. As in the *Republic*, it is the Moirai—the Fates—who preside over the whole affair. Atropos, on the sun, sets the process going; Clotho, moving round on the moon, 'binds and combines'; Lachesis, the chanciest of the three, joins in as the souls approach earth.

The elements of this fantasy come from many places. They include Platonic reminiscences, traces of astrology, much literary as well as popular tradition. The synthesis is Plutarch's; he did not find the scheme as it is in earlier writers. Later, as it seems, in *Socrates' Sign* (591B), he made another construction out of much the same pieces.[9] There however it is a metaphysical, not a psychological, scheme in which the sun and the moon play their part and the three Moirai hold the keys.

The history of literary visions of the underworld runs from Homer to Dante and beyond. Plutarch holds an important place

[9] The relative dating is, I think, assured by the comparison between the two schemes, since it is actually difficult to understand the scheme in *Socrates' Sign* without knowledge of the other.

in the story. He lavished art and ingenuity on these elaborate set-pieces, in which imitation of Plato did not prevent him from adumbrating doctrines Plato never knew and creating fantasies in the taste of his own age.

So the inhabitants of the moon are *daimones*. What does this signify?

In *The Decline of Oracles* (410B), a certain Cleombrotus of Sparta is made to tell some strange stories. He was a great traveller, and the object of his travels was 'to gather information (*historia*) as the raw material, as it were, of a philosophy which, to use his own words, made theology (*theologia*) its ultimate aim.' Cleombrotus is perhaps not to be taken too seriously; there is a distinct difference between his activity and what we may suppose to have been Plutarch's, for whom *theologia*, as for Plato, is bound by patterns of morality. Exotic wisdom, however fascinating, needed, in Plutarch's view, critical sifting. It follows that when Cleombrotus says that the doctrine of *daimones*, in the sense of beings supposed to be intermediate between gods and men, has been of greater value in philosophy than Plato's doctrine of 'matter', he may well be showing more enthusiasm than Plutarch himself felt. But that this concept, or rather group of concepts, is important to Plutarch is plain, not only from the set expositions here and in *Isis and Osiris*, but from its incidental use in psychology, in the interpretation of myth, and in the *Lives*.

In *Isis and Osiris*,[10] Plutarch seeks an acceptable explanation of the appalling story of Osiris' treacherous murder and subsequent dismemberment by Typhon. He distinguishes such tales from mere poetic fiction: this is a significant myth, Egyptian tradition is ancient and important. A historical or 'Euhemeristic' interpretation is impious and will not do. 'Better'—less offensive, more appropriate—is the approach suggested by the doctrine of *daimones*. This has its classic authorities: Pythagoras, Plato, Plato's pupil Xenocrates, the Stoic Chrysippus, all basing themselves on earlier *theologoi*. In the parallel account in Cleombrotus'

[10] See especially 358E–361E.

speech (414F), Zoroaster and other foreign sources are mentioned as well, no doubt in keeping with Cleombrotus' exotic interests and experiences. And in both accounts there are poetical as well as philosophical *auctores*. Thus, in *Isis* we are told how Homer used the adjective *daimonios* of good and bad alike, so anticipating the view of Xenocrates and others that some *daimones* have sinister natures. Cleombrotus in turn adduces slightly different pieces of scholarly information: that Homer uses *daimones* as a synonym of *theoi* (gods), and that Hesiod[11] was the first to distinguish clearly the various grades of rational being: gods, *daimones*, heroes, men. It was indeed this passage of Hesiod, together with the statements about *daimones* in Plato's *Symposium*, that formed the central justificatory texts which later writers on these subjects were in the habit of adducing.[12] Cleombrotus' account however goes further; he takes up the bizarre analogy which Xenocrates[13] made between *daimones* and isosceles triangles, which are neither equilateral nor scalene but between the two, partaking of the nature of both. He also adopts the idea, which we have already encountered, of some association between *daimones* and the moon, the moon being the intermediary in the system of the universe. Finally, he attributes sinister and cruel actions to some *daimones*. How seriously Plutarch took all this is hard to say. Of course he makes use of the ideas elsewhere, and notably in the myths; but his final attitude may be rather one of Academic reserve than of commitment. We must not forget that Cleombrotus' arguments are not left untouched in the subsequent discussion, and the concluding speech of Lamprias leaves the *daimones* with only a minor role in the explanation of the prophetic power of the oracle.

We saw that, as an interpreter of Plato, Plutarch viewed the cause of evil in the world as psychical and not material. No doubt he was tempted to link this doctrine with the concept of demonic

[11] *Works and Days* 122.
[12] G. Soury, *La Démonologie de Plutarque*, is the most substantial treatment of all this, though he represents Plutarch's views as more coherent than they probably were.
[13] R. Heinze, *Xenokrates*, 79.

beings, whether disembodied souls or demigods, some of whom might be dangerously spiteful and malicious unless their anger was turned by apotropaic rituals. This seems to have been what Xenocrates held. It is not clear whether Plutarch finally formed a view about it, but he certainly knew and reflected on the possibility. No doubt also he shared a religious sentiment characteristic of the age: the demand for mediators between god and man. This is a widespread phenomenon of the age when Christianity took root; perhaps we may plausibly see it as a natural consequence, in an anxious population, of the distancing of the divine from ordinary experience that followed from the Hellenistic diffusion of philosophical ideas. The word *daimon* had a long and confused history. Originally 'allotter', it naturally came to mean luck, and hence the destiny or, more personally, the 'guardian angel' of an individual. This concept has no necessary connection either with that of the intermediary or with that of the active but disembodied soul. But the connection is often made in practice. Plutarch relates 'guardian' to 'mediator' most explicitly in *Socrates' Sign*, at least if we are meant to interpret the myth, with its *nous-daimon*, in terms of Theanor's account of the divine guidance of Epaminondas. Sometimes he is more cautious; in this connection it is worth looking at his handling of one of the most famous supernatural stories in the tradition, the appearance of the phantom to Brutus in Asia[14]

It was a dark night, and the light in the tent was not very bright. The whole camp was still. Brutus was thinking about something and turning it over in his mind, when he became aware of someone coming in. Looking towards the door, he saw a weird and terrible vision . . . 'Who are you?' he cried, 'god or man? Why have you come to me?' 'I am your evil *daimon*, Brutus,' answered the phantom; 'you will see me at Philippi.' 'I will,' answered Brutus, unperturbed . . . In the morning he went to Cassius and told him of the vision. Now Cassius was an Epicurean . . . 'Our view, Brutus,' he said, 'is that not all our experiences or visions are true; perception is malleable and deceptive, and the mind

[14] *Brutus* 36 ff.: F. E. Brenk, in *Actes du VIIIe Congrès . . . Budé*, 1969, 588 ff.

is even quicker than the senses to shift and change to any kind of thing with no factual cause. Wax is moulded from without; the human mind, which comprises within itself both the moulder and the moulded, can easily shape and vary itself by its own devices. Witness the sudden turns that our imaginative faculty takes in dreams, when it moves in response to all kinds of experiences and images from a slight cause; its nature is to be in perpetual motion, and the motion is an act of imagining or thinking. In your case, a fatigued body naturally produces an oscillation and distortion of the mind. As to *daimones*: it is not likely they exist, and if they do it is not likely they should have human shape or voice or power that can penetrate to us. I wish they had, so that we, as champions of piety and honour, might have had divine help to give us confidence, and not only arms and horses and ships.'

The strange thing about this passage is that the Epicurean Cassius' explanation could hardly be less Epicurean in content. Epicurus held that the senses were veracious, not that they were unreliable, and that gods at least were seen by men in dreams in human form. It would have been easy to construct an Epicurean view of a harmless atomic phantom. But Plutarch has not done this; he has given us the speech of an unbeliever, but in Aristotelian or Academic terms. It is tempting to think that this is Plutarch's kind of scepticism in the face of a story of this sort. At any rate there is nothing here to suggest the intermediary or guardian *daimon*.

It must, I think, be wrong to attribute any firm system of 'demonology' to Plutarch. Literary and philosophical tradition, the wisdom of the East, the popular beliefs of Hellas, were all known to him. They provided material for conjecture and adaptation. If he ever came to a definite approval or rejection, it was on the ground of moral 'probabilities'.

Nor is this true only of *daimones*. More fundamental religious issues, immortality and the validity of cult, make the same sort of impression. Even in the *Consolation* to his wife on the death of the child Timoxena (608A), there is a curious hesitancy. Belief in immortality is there all right, but it is restrained and uncertain. 'It is harder to disbelieve than to believe in' our departure to a better place: a truly Academic absence of dogma. The emphasis in the *Consolation* lies rather on the warning repeatedly given against ostentatious emotionalism in mourning. Plutarch seems particularly anxious lest his wife should disgrace herself—and him—by some feminine indulgence in superstitious practice. Exhortation rather than comfort is the dominant note.

And this concern with outward behaviour and propriety in religion recurs in many places. Decency seems almost more central to Plutarch's religion than belief.

Superstition (164E) is a key text. It is a rather declamatory piece, in which superstition (*deisidaimonia*) is made out to be a worse evil than the opposite extreme of atheism. It is represented as the most abject kind of terror:

He who fears god fears everything—earth, sea, air, heaven, darkness, light, sound, silence, dreams. Slaves forget their masters in sleep, sleep lightens prisoners' chains; inflamed wounds, savage ulcers of the flesh, excruciating pains, all cease when the patient rests:

> O dear consoling sleep, help in my sickness,
> how sweet your coming to me in my need![15]

Superstition does not let you say this. She alone makes no truce with sleep but denies the mind this unique chance of achieving relaxation and renewed confidence by repulsing her bitter and painful doctrines concerning the divine. The sleep of the superstitious is like the Hell of the wicked: superstition rouses fearsome images of demons, monstrous phantoms, avenging Furies. She torments the wretched soul, she chases it from sleep with nightmares. Flogged and beaten at its own hands, the soul imagines it suffers at the hands of others and accepts bizarre and terrible commands. (165D ff.)

Death itself brings no relief:

Hell's 'deep gates' open, rivers of fire coalesce with the streams of Styx. The darkness is full of fantastic spectres, with horrid looks and piteous cries: judges, torturers, abysses, gulfs crammed with innumerable woes. (167A)

[15] Euripides, *Orestes* 211.

Atheism, the lack of belief in the gods, is by contrast a less serious thing, an intellectual error not aggravated by this emotional trauma.

Yet nobody who reads Plutarch or thinks of his career can doubt for a moment that he was a pious believer, or that he thought it at any rate a reasonable hope to trust in another life and happiness therein for the virtuous. Explicit statements are not hard to find; here is one from one of the polemics against the Epicureans:

> In destroying the belief in immortality, the Epicureans destroy the sweetest and greatest hopes of the mass of mankind. What are we to believe of the good, who have lived pious and upright lives and expect no evil yonder but only things most lovely and divine? Athletes receive their prizes not during the contest but after they have won. Similarly, the belief that the prizes of victory in life are reserved for the good when life is over makes people feel a marvellous enthusiasm for virtue in the light of these expectations, which embrace also the spectacle of the due punishment of such persons as now take advantage of power and wealth to be arrogant and thoughtlessly contemptuous of their superiors. Secondly: no lover of these things succeeds in satisfying himself on earth with truth and the vision of reality. Our reason is befogged and confused in the mist or cloud, as it were, of the body. Man looks upwards, in hope of flying bird-like from the body to something grand and splendid; and philosophy is his practice for death. (1105C ff.)

Superstition certainly seems to strike a different note from these other-worldly echoes of the *Phaedo*. Two explanations of the contrast have commonly been put forward. One is that *Superstition* is one of a pair of pieces the other of which would deal similarly with atheism. This has little plausibility; what we have is clearly a comparison between the two vices, with the neat Aristotelian conclusion that they are the extremes corresponding to the 'mean', which is piety. The other and commoner view is that Plutarch changed his mind and became more pious as he grew older, and that *Superstition* is an unusually early work. There is no independent argument for this, and it is circular to

deduce difference of date from difference of doctrine. The most probable solution is that we must try to reconcile the two points of view. Nor is this so difficult after all. The prospect of rewards after death is only a hope; but what is certain, and removes all cause for panic, is the fairness and goodness of God. The atheist is a fool, the superstitious man is impious:

> I would rather have people say there is no such person as Plutarch than that Plutarch is an unstable, changeable character, quick to anger, vindictive over trivialities, and easily offended. (170A)

The Platonist theme of the essential reliability and goodness of God is the key to Plutarch's attitude to religion. 'Rest content,' he seems to say, 'with the hopes that philosophy and religion extend; we all know we can't be dogmatic about it.'

It follows that the right interpretation of cult and myth was of central importance. For a man of civilised morals and conservative inclinations confronting the bizarre heritage of Greek and barbarian practice and legend, this raises at once the possibility of allegory. Now allegory had a long history in Greek speculation,[16] and both Platonists and Stoics had attended to it, and for more or less the same motives, since both parties habitually liked to conserve tradition, to exploit the wisdom of the poets, and to show respect to science and learning. Stoic treatments of the subject were particularly ingenious; the extant first-century treatises of Cornutus and 'Heraclitus' are good examples, and Plutarch certainly knows and uses work like theirs. The general principle of allegorical interpretation was not a sectarian matter. What mattered was good sense in employing it and regard to the canons of decency and morality. Where Plutarch criticises the interpretation of others, it is on these grounds that he does it. 'Myths must be handled not as if they were factual statements'—*logoi*: the *logos-muthos* contrast is Plato's—'but by adopting out of each what is *appropriate*, on the principle of likeness' (374E). Euhemerist readings of myth inevitably contravene this (360A); Euhemerus 'spread atheism through the world' by degrading the

[16] A good brief account by J. Tate, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. Allegory.

gods of common belief into supposed historical characters. This was the ultimate neglect of propriety, an over-riding of the most important status-rule of all. Purely physical allegory is often, though not necessarily, wrong for similar reasons. For instance, it is wrong to explain the improper story of Ares' adultery with Aphrodite, an old stumbling-block in the use of Homer as a moral educator, in astrological terms as 'Mars in conjunction with Venus portending adulterous births' (19E). More explicitly, in *Isis and Osiris*:

> It is not right to think of Osiris or Isis as water or sun or earth or sky, nor of Typhon as fire or drought or sea. If we are to avoid error, we must attribute to Typhon anything in these which lacks due measure or order on account of some excess or defect, while we honour and respect the ordered, good and useful as the handiwork of Isis and the image, reproduction and principle of Osiris. (376F)

It ought to follow that Plutarch should not seriously put forward a physical explanation as the last word on a problem of the evaluation of myth or cult. In *The Daedala at Plataea*,[17] an account of a local Boeotian ritual involving an aniconic wooden cult-object, the surviving fragment speaks with approval of a 'physical' explanation as 'appropriate'. It also includes an allegory in which Zeus represents a 'hot fiery force'. This last point is clearly Stoic. Since the passage seems to be a speech addressed to an audience of several people, the conclusion that it is a speech in a dialogue is justified. It need not therefore represent Plutarch's own opinion, and it does not disturb the general picture.

Allegory was thus a main method of justifying to a literate and in some ways very sophisticated public the teachings and cult-practices of a traditional religion which went back to very much more primitive ways of thinking. It also fulfilled the function of interpreting non-Greek religions and integrating them into the general framework of an acceptable philosophical attitude to the gods. For Plutarch's *theologia* did not confine itself to the Hellenic range. Roman cult was naturally a major interest; his wide reading

[17] Fr. 157 Sandbach.

in the antiquities of this subject is displayed both in the *Lives* and in the very learned collection of *problēmata* called *Roman Questions*. Of the newer cults that were spreading through the cities and armies of the Mediterranean world, he says nothing of Christianity, still an affair of a few scattered communities; and nothing, more surprisingly, of Mithraism, though he had some knowledge of Zoroastrian ideas. He does however discuss the Jews;[18] there was a fair amount of gentile literature on Jewish matters. He talks not only of their food taboos but of the identity of their god. The Athenian Moiragenes (671C) is made to adduce various proofs from cult that the Jews in fact worship Dionysus; and if it were permitted to reveal the mystical teaching of Eleusis, he would, he claims, be able to adduce more. But Plutarch's most important excursion into non-Greek religion is the great treatise *Isis and Osiris*. In this, his characteristic dualistic Platonism is applied to the interpretation of Egyptian myth. The Isiac and the Platonist join in a fascinating synthesis; was Apuleius perhaps thinking of this when he made the initiate-hero of the *Metamorphoses* a kinsman of Plutarch?

In all this, as in the interpretation of philosophical texts, moral concern and learning go hand in hand. The learning often seems formal and pedantic, and expresses itself in the stereotyped sentences of the commentator, but it also involves vast reading and sometimes a shrewd philosophical or anthropological judgment. In the accumulation of *historia*, Plutarch resembles his character Cleombrotus; where he differs from him is in bringing the resulting *theologia* under the critical control of morality, propriety, and reason. In this, his thought shows some analogy with his literary position. We saw that in language and style he represents the old order, the continuous tradition, not the new archaism of the international sophistic that followed. Similarly in matters of religion: he belongs to the continuous tradition of Hellenic piety and Hellenic scepticism, not much affected by the great changes in religious feeling which he could sense in the world around.

[18] e.g. *Table Talk* 4.4–6; *Isis and Osiris* 363C.

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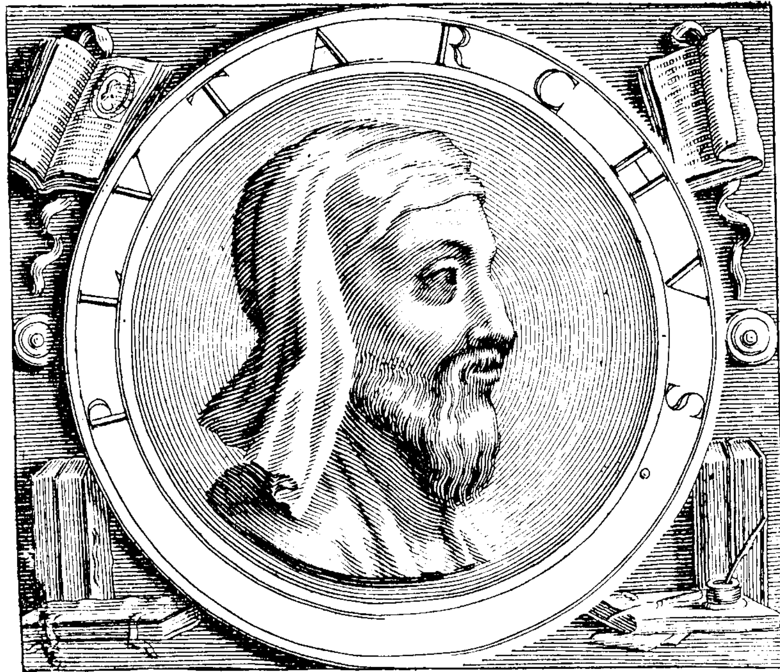
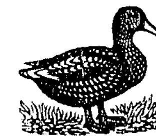


Ta ſage inſtruction ſert de riche couronne
A Trajan, eſleué par deſſus tous humains.
Si les grands te portoient au cœur & dans leurs mains,
Vertu viuroit au lieu de Venus & Bellone

Medallion of Plutarch, with verses by Simon Goulart, from *Les hommes illustres grecs et romains*, translated from the Greek by Jacques Amyot, published by Frederic Leonard, Paris, 1655.

PLUTARCH

D. A. Russell



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