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Phoenix, Vol. 43, No. 1. (Spring, 1989), pp. 62-68.

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CHARACTER CHANGE IN PLUTARCH

SIMON SWAIN

THERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL worthwhile treatments of Plutarch's conception of character change.¹ It is agreed that most of his heroes have fairly stable characters: Plutarch assumes a personality from the outset and maintains and/or develops it throughout the biography. In this sense of development characters change; but it is only rarely that Plutarch admits the possibility of a radical turnaround in a man's character, a complete departure from his earlier characteristics. It has been noted that this staticism is firmly located within Greek literary traditions. In the following pages I want to consider more closely mechanisms of character change in Plutarch's thinking, and why it is that he envisaged one or two exceptional cases of real change in the subjects of his biographies.

What in Plutarch's eyes makes an individual? What does he mean when he talks of ἦθος?² To start with there are inherited characteristics passed on in families (cf. *De sera num. vind.* 559d, δυνάμιν τινα καὶ κοινωνίαν διαπεφυκυίαν). These are clearly important in Plutarch's presentation of his heroes' own characters. For example, *Aemilius* 2 emphasizes traits in Aemilius' ancestors which he himself shows; *Cato Minor* 1 indicates the ancestry of Cato's virtue. But environment is more important than heredity. Plutarch tells us that it is difficult to decide whether those who suffer from inherited faults will also turn out bad, because "the involvement of human nature [ἡ δ' ἀνθρώπου φύσις] in our habits, attitudes, and regulations often makes it hide its failings and imitate τὰ καλά, the result being that it either wipes out and escapes entirely from an inherited stain of vice, or else envelops itself in a cover of duplicity for a long time" (*De sera num. vind.* 562b). "Correct therapy" can restore the soul to its "proper state" (551d; for therapy cf. *De vit. pud.* 530e, *De gen. Socr.* 584e), "for τὸ μεταβάλλον of man has been labelled his τρόπος and ἦθος, since ἔθος [habit] sinks very deep, takes hold firmly, and wields the greatest power" (*De sera num. vind.* 551e).

Character is determined by habituation. Plutarch has a good deal to say about this along Aristotelian lines in the essay *De virtute morali*. By nature

¹See D. A. Russell, "On Reading Plutarch's Lives," *G&R* 13 (1966) 144-147; A. Wardman, *Plutarch's Lives* (London 1974) 132-140; F. Brenk, *In Mist Apparelled* (Leiden 1977) 171-181; C. Gill, "The Question of Character-Development: Plutarch and Tacitus," *CQ NS* 33 (1983) 469-481.

²On what follows see A. Dihle, *Studien zur griechischen Biographie* (Göttingen 1956) 57-87.

the soul has a rational and an irrational part (442a-c). Plutarch holds that ἦθος is the qualitative form given by the rational through habituation to the irrational (443c-d, τὴν ποιότητα ταύτην καὶ τὴν διαφορὰν ἔθει λαμβάνει τὸ ἄλογον ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου πλαττόμενον), which enables the rational to control the passions.³ Education plays a major role in this habit-forming,⁴ in which it is aided by age.⁵ Thus the ἕξις (permanent state) of the soul is the condition of the irrational ἐξ ἔθους ἐγγενομένη, κακία μὲν, ἂν φαύλως, ἀρετὴ δ', ἂν καλῶς ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου παιδαγωγηθῆ τὸ πάθος (443d). Human nature, φύσις, which is often said to be for Plutarch the immutable element in our make-up compared with character, but is in fact several times spoken of by him in terms of something changeable, responsive to habit, and closely allied with character (*Sulla* 30.6, *Arat.* 51.4, *Sert.* 10.6, *Cim.* 2.5, *Mul. virt.* 243c, *De sera num. vind.* 562b),⁶ may in his thought be close to signifying this permanent state of good or bad which is stable in most people but, as we shall see, liable in some to serious change.

There is room for individuality—as we would see it—in this idea of the ποιότης and διαφορὰ of τὸ ἄλογον. At *Quaest. con.* 8.9, 732b, Plutarch affirms that qualitative differences do make for real differences between items which have a similar basis such as vinegar and sour wine or μίνθος and ἡδύοσμος. Further, one and the same basic virtue will appear differently in different people (*Phoc.* 3.7). At *Mul. virt.* 243c he observes that virtues possessing particular core powers adopt “certain other differences, their own colouring as it were, because of the natures [sc. of individuals] and assimilate themselves to the habits which underlie these, the temperaments of the bodies, the upbringings and ways of life.” But although Plutarch is taking into account individual traits here, he is particularly concerned with environmental influence. We have already seen the extent to which ἦθος depends on habituation. “Upbringing” and “ways of life” take this further.⁷ The idea of root virtues manifesting themselves differently in individuals in different societies helps to explain Plutarch’s frequent assertion in the *Parallels* that he considered chosen pairs to be really very similar with only minor or indiscernible differences in character,⁸ for he often also distinguishes in the

³For ἦθος/ἔθος, cf. *De sera num. vind.* 551e above; Aristotle *EN* 1103a17 f., Plato *Laws* 792e.

⁴See below, 65; and, e.g., *De virt. mor.* 452d; *Arat.* 3.3, 10.5; *Lys.* 2.4 and *Ages.* 5.5 on the character-forming effect of Spartan παιδεία.

⁵See, e.g., *De sera num. vind.* 552d, *Fab.* 3.7, *Them.* 2.7.

⁶So Gill (above, n. 1) 478–479, with notes.

⁷“Temperament” (κράσις) means the physical nature of the person; it is often also used of the spiritual nature: cf. *Numa* 3.7 (φύσει . . . κεκραμένους τὸ ἦθος), *Brut.* 1.3 (φύσιν . . . κραθῆναι), *Galba* 1.3, *Arat.* 4.1.

⁸Cf., e.g., *Thes.* 2.1; *Cim.* 3.3; *Demetr.* 1.8; *Per.* 2.5; *Dion* 1.3; *Demosth.* 3.3; *Aem.* 1.7, *Aem.-Tim. synk.* 1.1; *Phoc.* 3.6–9; *Pel.* 2.11, *Pel.-Marc. synk.* 1.1–3; *Arist.-Cato synk.* 1.1; *Lyc.-Numa synk.* 1.1–2; *Phil.-Flam. synk.* 3.5.

synkrisis the effects of heroes' differing backgrounds and circumstances.⁹ It seems to be the case that on Plutarch's blueprint of character we are less "personal beings," with clearly unique and individual traits, and more "social beings," whose individuality depends to a large degree on how basic human qualities are shaped by environmental and social factors.

An important constituent of these factors is chance; the way in which chance affects character requires comment. At *De virt. mor.* 443e ff. Plutarch distinguishes between the two aspects of λόγος in the soul: that which concerns absolute existence has as its virtue σοφία; that which concerns existence relative to us has as its virtue φρόνησις.¹⁰ The latter is the virtue of daily living; the former, the "maximum power of reason" (444d), is simply not a human asset (*De soll. anim.* 962c, *Publ.* 6.5). As Plutarch says at *De virt. mor.* 443f, φρόνησις is involved with τὸ πρακτικὸν καὶ παθητικόν,¹¹ "for which reason it has need of τύχη, whereas σοφία has no need of it nor of βουλή."¹²

By τύχη Plutarch clearly means "chance," for he goes on to speak of the involvement of φρόνησις with τὰ τυχερά (444a), a term which only means "chance events."¹³ Chance does not refer merely to day-to-day happenings.¹⁴ It is apparently responsible also for where we are born. This role of τύχη emerges from *Quaest. con.* 9.5, 740c-d,¹⁵ where in the midst of expounding a passage of Plato (*Rep.* 620b) Plutarch's brother Lamprias explains the relation between fate, free will, and chance. Fate (εἰμαρμένη) compels the good life for souls who choose correctly before birth and the bad life for those who make a bad choice; the actual choice of good or bad is a matter of free will. He then says that αἱ δὲ τῶν κλήρων ἀτάκτως

⁹For example, Solon possessed equal ἀρετή to Publicola but lacked his τύχη and δύναμις τελεσιουργός (*Sol.-Publ. synk.* 3.5); Aemilius and Timoleon were both just men, but Aemilius was helped in this by the society of the time (*Aem.-Tim. synk.* 2.1); Ti. and C. Gracchus could rely on an excellent τροφή and παιδεία compared with Agis and Cleomenes (*Ag./Cleom.-Gracchi synk.* 1.2); Philopoemen's worth owed little to official powers unlike Flaminius (*Phil.-Flam. synk.* 2.2, 3.1); cf. *Cim.-Luc. synk.* 2.2.

¹⁰Cf. further *De an. procr. in Tim.* 1024e-f, 1025e, with the Loeb editor, H. Cherniss (*Plutarch's Moralia* 13.1 [Cambridge, Mass. and London 1976]), *ad loc.*

¹¹Cf. Aristotle *EN* 1104b13-16, 1109b30, 1178a9-21 with Aspasius *In Eth. Nic.* p. 42, 13-26, p. 58, 5-6 Heylbut and Heliodorus *In Eth. Nic. Paraphr.* p. 224, 15-19 Heylbut.

¹²"La formule ne se trouve pas littéralement chez Aristote . . . mais . . . elle est conforme à l'esprit de la conception aristotélicienne" (D. Babut, *Plutarque: De la vertu éthique* [Paris 1969] 150, n. 80).

¹³E.g., *Demosth.* 3.3, *De fort.* 100a, *De tranq. an.* 477a.

¹⁴On the daily confrontation between man and chance, especially in the *Lives*, see A. Perez-Jimenez, "Actitudes dei Hombre Frente a la Tyche en las 'Vidas Paralelas' de Plutarcho," *Bol. del Inst. de Estud. Hel.* 7 (1973) 101-110.

¹⁵Cf. D. Babut, *Plutarque et la Stoïcisme* (Paris 1979) 307 ff.; beware of his use of [Plutarch] *De fato*. Babut is correct to say that Plutarch did not hold with the Stoic idea of fate/necessity. In this passage, though, εἰμαρμένη is equivalent to God, providence, etc.

διασπειρομένων ἐπιπτώσεις τὴν τύχην παρεισάγουσιν καὶ τροφαῖς καὶ πολιτείαις, ὧν ἕκαστοι λαγχάνουσι, πολλὰ τῶν ἡμετέρων προκαταλαμβάνουσιν. Lamprias (and we may presume Plutarch also) means by “chance taking charge in advance” that where we are born, a matter of pure chance, will entail a definite type of upbringing in a particular society.

The importance for character of where we are born and grow up harks back, of course, to fifth-century influences such as *Airs, Waters, Places*.¹⁶ Not only are individual virtues affected by circumstances and society (see *Mul. virt.* 243c, above, 63). One’s whole disposition is set thereby. As we have seen, the irrational part of the soul is moulded by the rational part (*De virt. mor.* 443c). It is possible for a soul whose λόγος is deficient to let the passions go out of control and so be characterized by κακία rather than ἀρετή (443d). λόγος (“reason”) is not just internal. Plutarch envisages it co-operating with νόμος (“law” or “custom”) as an external force (παιδεία) keeping the passions in check (452d). As is stated at *De soll. anim.* 962c, “λόγος is implanted by nature, but σπουδαῖος λόγος καὶ τέλειος is the product of care and instruction.” When the soul has got into bad habits a course of training is needed to sort it out (cf. *De sera num. vind.* 551d, above, 62). Plutarch does not suggest that training or habituation is dependent on chance; but the sort of training, habituation, in a word education, that is open to us does depend ultimately on where we live and on the chance of birth.¹⁷

Given the close relationship between circumstantial factors and character it is not surprising that great changes in circumstances may be enough to change character. In talking of this we must be careful to distinguish between development and alteration. I am not concerned here with the former. The question to be considered is rather that of the alteration of character. Plutarch certainly accepted the possibility of this. He remarks at *De sera num. vind.* 559b–c that as time goes by a friend or a relation may hardly recognize the appearance of someone he knows, whereas changes in character, which “responds easily to every argument, hardship, passion, and law,” will astound even a constant companion. But Plutarch does not often talk of radical character change.¹⁸ He does not often talk of change from bad to good because he assumes that in most people and in human society as a whole the path of virtue is the natural direction (*De sera num. vind.* 551d, *Per.* 2.2, etc.). This is reinforced if the λόγος of the soul is set firmly by education. When Plutarch speaks as a philosopher he assumes that whether we are facing larger circumstances, such as Eumenes had to (*Eum.* 9.1–2), or smaller ones such as sickness or loss of property

¹⁶For example, *Airs, Waters, Places* 23–24; Hdt. 9.122.

¹⁷Cf. Strabo 2.3.7: καὶ τέχνηαι δὲ καὶ δυνάμεις καὶ ἐπιτηδεύσεις [of humans] . . . τὰ μὲν φύσει ἔστιν ἐπιχώρια τισι, τὰ δ’ ἔθει καὶ ἀσκήσει.

¹⁸Cf. Wardman (above, n. 1) 136.

(*De tranq. an.* 475e) or personal crisis (*Aem.* 37.1), we should be able to resist owing to the independence of ἀρετή. This idea, expressed forcefully at *De tranq. an.* 475d–476a, is the message of the short *De fortuna*. Virtue, once set, should not be upset by chance. From the other angle, vice also does not depend on chance (*An vit. ad infel. suff.* 449f f.)—those who have chosen to follow the path of κακία have done so voluntarily from the outset, and hence there is no cause to talk of change from good to bad.

The strength of this idea of set character is seen plainly in the *Lives* where for most heroes Plutarch brings out distinguishing qualities from the earliest years. This is true of both the majority who have a stable character set on virtue, and also of the few whose characters are set on vice (particularly Demetrius, Antony, and Marius).¹⁹ On some occasions, though, Plutarch does discuss the possibility of change in the sense of alteration of character, a fundamental variation in one's set attitude towards good and bad. In the three well-known examples of this, Philip, Sulla, and Sertorius, the change is one of good to bad. There is no discussion of a fundamental change from bad to good. In fact Plutarch is hardly more willing to countenance the change from good to bad, for certainly in the case of Philip and very probably in that of Sulla he suggests that we are dealing with men who were always set on evil but appeared good for many years until they were in a position to practise their vices unopposed. Only with Sertorius does he appear to admit the possibility of genuine character alteration in his subject.

Let us take the clearest case first, that of Philip V of Macedon who is scrutinized by Plutarch at *Aratus* 49–51. For Plutarch Philip possesses an “innate κακία” which gradually shows itself (49.1). Philip might “seem to have undergone a massive and highly inexplicable μεταβολή,” but “in fact this was not a μεταβολή φύσεως, but a presentation in a time of safety of a κακία which for so long his fear had kept unrecognized” (51.4). Philip conforms to the rule Plutarch lays down at *De sera num. vind.* 562c: “the tyrant [which Philip is at *Arat.* 51.4] and the thief possess their wrongdoing from the start, but put their thievery and lawlessness into action when they find the opportunity and the ability.” Philip's case is paralleled by another figure in *Aratus*, Lydiadas, the tyrant of Megalopolis. At 30.2 we learn that he was “by nature not ignoble nor did he lack ambition,” and thus “changes” and cedes his tyranny to Aratus (30.3–4). In fact his new ἦθος as a non-tyrant turns out to be πεπλασμένον (30.7–8).²⁰ Comparable

¹⁹Cf. *Demetr.* 1.7–8 (Demetrius, Antony), *Sulla* 30.6 (Marius). On Demetrius, cf. Dihle (above, n. 2) 82–83 (wrong in suggesting that Plutarch has “die meiste Mühe . . . mit der Erklärung einer negativen Charakterentwicklung des Demetrios”).

²⁰On Philip and Lydiadas, contrast Polybius: Philip was good by nature and acquired his faults as he got older (10.26.8); Lydiadas stepping down from his tyranny showed qualities of “pragmatism and wisdom” (2.44.5; note that Plutarch, following Polybius, congratulates Lydiadas at *De sera num. vind.* 552b, cf. *Ag./Cleom.* 27.4).

with this type of change, or rather non-change, are those passages where Plutarch talks of a hero who is basically good doing something reprehensible "against his own nature" (*Aem.* 30.1, *Fab.* 26.2, *Crass.* 16.1). Normally "change" is not mentioned, but in *Pericles* Pericles' involvement in popular politics "against his own nature" (*Per.* 7.3) is described by Plutarch as a μεταβολή (9.1). However, as with Lydiadas, the change is one of political expediency (to counter Cimon), and Pericles eventually reverts to sort as a noble aristocrat (15.1).

Sulla is a more complicated case than Philip. Plutarch's remarks on him need to be taken with those he makes about Sertorius. At *Sulla* 30.6 after the massacre of the Antemnates and others Plutarch wonders if the change in Sulla from amiability to cruelty was "a κίνησις²¹ and μεταβολή of nature due to τύχη, or rather an uncovering of vice when a man is in power." With Sertorius too mildness was later on replaced by savagery (*Sertorius* 25.6), and at *Sert.* 10.5-7 Plutarch mentions the possibility that Sertorius' former qualities were put on "by calculation" with regard to circumstances: "Rather, in my opinion a virtue which is absolute and consistent in accordance with λόγος can never by any fortune be changed to its opposite, though on the other hand it is not impossible that good προαιρέσεις and φύσεις, when vitiated by great and undeserved calamities, change τὸ ἦθος along with their δαίμων [i.e., their fortune]."

We may consider Plutarch's approach to Sulla and Sertorius as follows. As a biographer, Plutarch naturally did not look on his subjects as perfect examples of virtue. In speaking of Lucullus, who deteriorated towards the end of his life, he suggests that "we should feel apologetic, as it were, for human nature [τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως] if it produces no character which is absolutely good and indisputably set on virtue" (*Cim.* 2.5). Plutarch is saying that the balance in the soul between rational and irrational and one's disposition to good or bad are not completely unshakeable. Politics and power are particularly dangerous in this respect. Plutarch is fully aware that the fruits of ambition, office, and wealth can make a man succumb and make him unhappy (*De tranq. an.* 466c, *An vit. ad infel. suff.* 498c, fr. 170 from the *Letter on Friendship*). Ideally, "in order for political deeds to acquire nobility as well as stature, δύναμις and τύχη combined must meet with φρόνησις and δικαιοσύνη" (*Dion* 1.3).²² In reality, in situations of great power statesmen may act stupidly and unjustly. The causes of such wrongdoing are πολιτική ανάγκη or τὸ πάθος (*Cim.* 2.5). The passions will be especially strong when coupled with power (*Ad princ. indoct.* 782c). Indeed, "should κακία acquire fame, and if honour and good repute should attach to its seduction through pleasures or profits, there is no φύσις so

²¹That is, of the passions—cf. *De virt. mor.* 443d, *Demosth.-Cic. synk.* 3.2, *Per.* 38.2 (= Theophrastus *Ethics* fr. 146 Wimmer τὰ ἦθη καὶ κινούμενα τοῖς πάθεσι).

²²Cf. *Demosth.-Cic. synk.* 3.4, both drawing on Plato *Rep.* 473d.

fortunate or strong that it will not master" (*De laude ips.* 545e). Plutarch is saying that in such situations φρόνησις will not be able to control the passions, and the balance of the soul, its ἕξις, will be altered. In the second cause, πολιτικὴ ἀνάγκη, he is thinking of the circumstances in which a statesman will find that he must carry out evil actions in order to preserve his position. If these actions are sufficiently bad, rather than being "against his own nature" it might amount to a permanent departure from his previous character.

In Sulla's case, then, Plutarch says that τύχη (in the shape of great power) might have put him in the situation where he had to carry out actions which fundamentally reversed the principles by which he had until then lived. Plutarch recognizes the possibility of a change of character since Sulla was not a stable person (cf. 6.14 ἀνώμαλος καὶ διάφορος πρὸς ἑαυτόν). He also accounts for Sulla's change by suggesting that it may have been no more a change than Philip's, and that Sulla was naturally disposed to evil as was the only ancestor of his mentioned at 1.1.²³ Plutarch has already explained Sulla's inconsistency with regard to punishments as "calculated self-advantage" (6.15). Hence at 30.6 he talks of an ἀποκάλυψις ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ κακίας. As he puts it at *Demosth.-Cic. synk.* 3.2, power and office will fully reveal the faults of a man. It is important to note that Plutarch refrains from deciding which alternative explanation is true. Although the tenor of the *Life*, especially 12.5–14, shows that he clearly did not like Sulla, he is as fair to him as he can be and will not convict him of innate evil.

With Sertorius Plutarch again mentions the alternative possibilities, that the good qualities were a sham and that political necessity drove him to evil. Here he discounts the first idea. Sertorius' change of character was because of the circumstances in which a statesman might find himself when his luck runs out (*Sert.* 10.7, cf. *Demetr.-Ant. synk.* 2.3), and Sertorius may be excused through bad fortune. On the scheme of character make-up offered in the *De virt. mor.* and other works one might say that Sertorius' φρόνησις reacting with τύχη has let τὰ πάθη gain control, and thus the permanent balance of his soul has changed.

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²³On ancestral faults, see above, 62.