

PLOUTARCHOS, n.s.

Scholarly Journal of the
INTERNATIONAL PLUTARCH SOCIETY

Plutarchus



Plutarchus ein natürlicher maister vnd aussprechender geistlicher vberweiser vnd ein gepie-
ter vñ anrichter des kaisers Trayani ist zu diser zeit an sinne vmbtinget vñ glantz-
würdigkeit in fast großer achtung gewest. von dem Dolcantes in jener vnsungigen vñ glantz-
Plutarchus der natürlich maister vñ in dem heiligthumb schen der siten ein so vnsig in de fest-
gewest das er leichtlich ein gepierer des kaisers hat mögen erkennen. vñ Plutar-
chus tet sundern fleiß dem kaiser seinen unger vier ding eingepiden. nemlich das er vñ
digkeit. sein selbs erkantet. der amblewt man gar vil bacher von mancherley materien vñ
sachen in frechischem vñ lateinlichem gesung got treffentlich beschrubt vñ mit seiner
tappferheit bey Trayano angenehme begabung erlangt.

VOLUME 1 (2003/2004)

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ENKRATEIA: PLUTARCH ON SELF-CONTROL AND THE POLITICS OF EXCESS

by

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Abstract

Whether Plutarch made programmatic statements about the moral themes of the *Lives* or used exemplars to make his point, he relied upon a *lingua franca* of moral virtues held in common with his audience. Antony and Demetrius failed as leaders, according to Plutarch, because of their primary character flaw, *akrasia* (lack of self-control). To Plutarch and his audience, *enkrateia* (self-control) was not simply the opposite of *akrasia* but part of a nuanced continuum of behavior. This essay briefly examines how Plutarch's *lingua franca* of self-control is defined in the *Moralia* and deployed in the *Lives* of Alexander, Demetrius, and Antony.

In a word, Antony wronged himself by his lack of self-control (*akrasia*), while Demetrius wronged others.

(*Compar. Demetr et Ant.* 4.6.1)

Plutarch announces in the prologue to his *Lives* of Demetrius and Antony that these biographies were offered as cautionary tales, "...so," as he states, "...we shall be more eager to observe and imitate the better lives if we are not left without lives that are blameworthy and bad" (*Demetr.* 1.6). Specifically, Plutarch warns against the many great vices visible in lives of excess. He characterizes Demetrius and Antony as lusty,

heavy drinkers who went to war on the slightest pretext, who were too free-handed with their money and arrogant as well¹. For Plutarch, these excesses had one outcome, namely, reversals of political and military fortune, and one cause: the lack of self-control (*akrasia*). However since the *Lives* of Demetrius and Antony are cautionary tales, they do not discuss the virtue of self-control per se. In fact, the word *enkrateia* does not occur in either life and its opposites *akrasia* and *akolasia* occur but rarely in the biographies of Antony and Demetrius. This fact should not be surprising since, as Duff points out, Plutarch usually leaves moral judgments implicit and allows the exempla presented in the

¹ ἐρωτικοί, ποτικοί, στρατιωτικοί, πολυτελεῖς, ὑβρισταί (*Demetr.* 1.7).

Lives to speak for themselves². Nevertheless, Plutarch's silence has not deterred Harrison from identifying *enkrateia* as the 'pre-eminent virtue' that provides the moral focus for the *Lives* of Demetrius and Antony³.

Since Plutarch's primary audience for the *Lives* consisted of his friends who often were navigating the offices of the Imperial *cursus honorum*⁴, the author could then rely upon the cultural knowledge shared by these men. As Stadter has demonstrated, the moral program of the *Lives* is not rule-based, rather it achieves *paideia* through observation and mirroring of the protagonists behavior⁵. Therefore Plutarchan *paideia* in the *Lives* relies upon the lingua franca of moral virtues that the audience members brought with them from their primary education in philosophy and rhetoric. This essay will examine that Plutarchan lingua franca concerning

self-control and its absence as discussed in the *Moralia*. We will then turn our attention to the deployment of the language of self-control in Plutarch's *Lives* of Demetrius, Antony, and for comparison's sake, Alexander to examine how these terms are used to underscore programmatic statements⁶.

Plutarch discusses *enkrateia* at length in *De Virtute Morali*⁷ and follows Plato and Aristotle in the belief that virtue (*êthos*)⁸ is not monolithic; rather it possesses a "two-fold nature" (*De Virtute Morali* 441). These two components of virtue (*êthos*) are called the Rational (*logos*) and Irrational (*to alogon*). Virtue is produced by the action of Reason on the Irrational part of the soul. Reason cannot and does not eradicate passion completely; rather, it places order and limitation on the irrational through the exercise of prudence (*phrônesis*). Within this operational frame-

² TIM DUFF, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, p. 6.

³ GEORGE W. M. HARRISON, "The Semiotics of Plutarch's Συγκρίσεις: The Hellenistic Lives of Demetrius-Antony and Agesilaus-Pompey", *Révue Belge de Philologie et d'histoire*, 73.1 (1995), p. 92.

⁴ PHILIP A. STADTER, "The Rhetoric of Virtue and Vice in Plutarch's *Lives*", in LUC VAN DER STOCKT (ed.), *Rhetorical Theory and Praxis in Plutarch*, Louvain: Peeters, 2000, pp. 495-7. Stadter argues against a student audience for the *Lives* and provides a thorough list and description of the men who embodied Plutarch's primary audience.

⁵ STADTER, 2000, pp.504-5.

⁶ This essay is excerpted from the author's longer survey of the use of the term *enkrateia* throughout Plutarch's works.

⁷ Especially the idea that virtue is really one, uniform concept with many names depending upon on the situation.

⁸ Plutarch refers to virtue as *êthos* in this section of *De Virtute Morali*.

work, Plutarch constructs a continuum for the virtue of self-control (*sophrosunê*, *enkrateia*) and its absence (*akrasia*, *akolasia*) based on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Sophrosunê (temperance) is the ultimate form of self-control, according to Plutarch. He defines the term using an equestrian metaphor borrowed from Plato's *Phaedrus*:

But the fact is that temperance (*sophrosunê*) belongs to the sphere where reason guides and manages the passionate element, like a gentle animal obedient to the reins, making it yielding in its desires and willingly receptive of moderation and propriety...

(*De Virtute Morali* 445b)

Sophrosunê, although involving a confrontation between the rational and irrational elements of the soul, implies a soul so disciplined and well educated that the passionate elements of the irrational part of the soul are quickly brought into harmony with Reason.

On the other hand, a certain lack of harmony between reason and passion consigns *enkrateia* (self-control) to the

status of being, "...less than a virtue" (*De Virtute Morali* 445d). Plutarch quotes Aristotle who in *Nicomachean Ethics*⁹ declares that *enkrateia* is not a virtue because it is "...a mixture of virtue and vice" (*Ethica Nicomachea*, 1128b 33)¹⁰. Again, Plutarch borrows the charioteer metaphor from Plato's *Phaedrus* to explain the working of *enkrateia*:

...the self-controlled man, while he does indeed direct his desire by the strength and mastery of reason, yet does so not without pain, nor by persuasion, but as it plunges sideways and resists, as though with blow and curb, he forcibly subdues it and holds it in, being the while himself full of internal struggle and turmoil.

(*De Virtute Morali* 445b-c)

The *engkratês*, or self-controlled man, may act in the same manner as the person possessed of *sophrosunê* but appearances are deceptive. The greater inner turmoil of the *engkratês* (self-controlled man) signals a lack of education, or failure of *paideia*. Reason may be stronger than Passion in the case of the *engkratês* but not by much. Thus, the *engkratês*, lacks inner peace.

⁹ Plutarch alludes to the end of section iv of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle discusses virtuous action and that to be called virtuous, an action must lack conditionality. For a full and highly nuanced discussion of *enkrateia*, see section vii of the *Ethica Nicomachea*.

¹⁰ This would seem to complicate Duff's argument that *akrasia* is a vice because it lacks the mixing of virtue and vice required to achieve moderation. Duff takes *akrasia* to mean both lack of self-control (*akrasia*) and lack of mixing (*akrasia*). See TIM DUFF, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice*, Oxford: OUP, 1999, p.92.

Plutarch discusses two aspects of the lack of self-control, *akrasía* (the absence of restraint) and *akolasía* (intemperance) in much the same manner. *Akolasía* is a full on vice, but *akrasía* is something less. In the process of *akrasía*, "...reason argues against the passions as it follows them" (445e). While the soul "...with the aid of reason, preserves its power of judgment intact, yet by its passions, which are stronger than its reason, it is swept along against its judgment" (*De Virtute Morali* 445e). *Akrasía*, as understood by Plutarch, is the sole province of neither the wise man (*sophos*) nor the fool. Rather, *akrasía* (lack of restraint) "...is the mark of the sophistic soul, which has, indeed, reason, but reason which cannot stand firm by its own just decisions" (*De Virtute Morali* 446c). The sophistic soul is skilled in argument but it is weak and fails to win its case against the passions.

In the case of *akolasía* (intemperance), Plutarch says, "...reason does not even fight" against Passion (*De Virtute Morali* 445e). Reason becomes the ally and advocate of dishonorable behavior in the case of intemperance. "It is character-

istic of intemperance," Plutarch declares, "that its reason shares joyfully in the indiscretions committed...reason is willingly swept along into shameful conduct" (*De Virtute Morali* 445e). The intemperate person (*akolastês*) is free of remorse.

In summary, *sophrosunê*, as an ultimate virtue, belongs to the realm of philosophy where *paideia* renders reason strong and passions compliant. *Akolasía*, on the other hand characterizes degraded human behavior that is not merely bereft of reason, but rather supported by the very faculty that should be opposing it. That leaves *enkrateia* and *akrasía* somewhere in the middle, less than virtue, less than vice.

Plutarch raises the topic of self-control and its *paideia* recurrently throughout his essays. This almost-virtue surfaces in discussions of how one ought to listen properly, healthy eating and drinking, parenting, marriage, lamentation, and how to avoid talking too much. *Enkrateia* is not limited to human beings but is abundantly demonstrated by members of the animal and insect kingdoms¹¹ as well. Plutarch does not explain how insects or animals train themselves to be more self-con-

¹¹ Plutarch tells us that animals demonstrate *enkrateia* in their parenting abilities (*De amore prolis*). In *De sollertia animalium* (966b8), he points to their *enkrateia* as proof that animals have the power to reason. In the same essay, he tells us that ants demonstrate the "seeds of temperance (*enkrateia*), prudence (*phronêsis*), and justice (*dikaïosunê*)." (*De sollertia animalium* 967d 11) He considers the *enkrateia* of dogs to be so commonly well recognized that he is embarrassed to even mention it (*De sollertia animalium* 969). Sexually, the *enkrateia* of animals is seen in the fact that they only mate with their equals, and never desire to mate with their betters (*Bruta animalia ratione uti* 988-9).

trolled¹². But for humans, *enkrateia* is a kind of intelligence¹³ that must be developed through training from an early age. For example, such early training will prevent one from becoming a busy body (*De curiositate* 520d 5) and listening with self-control will ensure that a student become a philosopher and not a sophist¹⁴.

The *paideia* of self-control is most commonly illustrated in the *Moralia* with regard to food, whether or not the subject is eating¹⁵. In the essay *De Genio Socratis*, which is primarily a discussion of justice, the Pythagorean training method for learning self-control is described. Plutarch reports that it was customary to exercise until ravenous, return home where a feast was being prepared and then to turn the feast over to one's servants while restricting oneself to more modest fare. The benefits extended beyond physical health. As Plutarch summarizes, "For abstention from pleasure in what it allowed is a training of the soul to resist what is forbidden" (*De Genio Socratis* 585).

Self-controlled speech receives attention in at least three of the *Moralia*¹⁶. "Just as lust ruins men, so loose talk destroys cities," Plutarch reminds us (*De garrulitate* 505). It is a virtue that requires extensive training (*askêsis*), is very difficult to achieve except by one's love of very hard work (*philoponia*) in mastering the emotions. Plutarch provides famous and dramatic examples of women and men who demonstrate *enkrateia* in speech. He reminds his audience that Odysseus' men demonstrated great self-control when they preferred "to be eaten raw" by the Cyclops rather than denounce Odysseus or reveal the plot to for escaping the cave. Plutarch call this, "... an example of self-control and loyalty not to be forgotten" (*De garrulitate* 506b 10-11).

Leaena, Aristogeiton's mistress, exemplifies the political ramifications of the *enkrateia* of speech for Plutarch. She was party to the conspiracy against the tyranny of Hippias and Hipparchus

¹² In *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute* (343a 3), Plutarch says that Alexander was naturally endowed with *enkrateia*, among other virtues, by the god who fathered him.

¹³ *De Fortuna* 97e8-15.

¹⁴ As Plutarch says, "...the man who has the habit of listening with restraint and respect takes in and masters a useful discourse, and more readily sees through and detects a useless or false one, showing himself thus to be a lover of truth and not a lover of disputation, nor forward and contentious." (*De recta ratione audiendi* 39c9-d2).

¹⁵ Aristotle would have agreed with Plutarch on this matter since he believed that the only behaviors in which *enkrateia* could rightly be exercised were with regard to eating and sex (*Ethica Nicomachea* 3.10,8).

¹⁶ *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* (90b), *De fortuna* (97e), *De garrulitate*, passim.

at Athens. After the coup was thwarted and Aristogeiton and his co-conspirator Harmodius were killed, Leaena was commanded to reveal the names of others who may have escaped detection. She remained silent and steadfast. The Athenians honored her self-control in the face of interrogation and tyranny, they

...made and set up a statue of a bronze lioness without a tongue in the gates of the Acropolis, representing by the spirited courage of the animal, Leaena's invincible character, and by its tonguelessness her power of silence in keeping a sacred trust secret.

(*De garrulitate* 505e1-f1)

This example reinforces the political importance of self-control as well as providing recognition of a woman's ability to achieve this level of self-discipline. Therefore as this representative sample of exempla from the *Moralia* indicates, *enkrateia*, for Plutarch, although it is a less than perfect virtue, is nevertheless a sign of *paideia*. It exists simultaneously as both a private and a social virtue that carries personal and political ramifications.

The term *enkrateia* occurs in several *Lives*¹⁷, but in no life more frequently than that of Alexander. Alexander was famous for the pure virtue of *sophrosunê* but his

self-control over his gustatory and sexual appetites were thought to be part of his ability to rule well. Plutarch praises Alexander, at several points in the text, for his self-control in the face of food and drink¹⁸ (*Alex.* 22.7.1, 23.9.1). Alexander believed that demonstrations of his self-mastery made him more kingly (*basilikôteros*), "He considered it a more kingly thing (*basilikôteron*) to control himself than to conquer his enemies" (*Alex.* 21.7). For example, after a long ride with his cavalry Alexander encounters Macedonians carrying water and who offer him a drink in front of his men. Alexander refuses because he does not want to dishearten his troops. His action has the desired effect; his troops are so inspired by Alexander's abstemiousness that they continue their way with renewed fervor, "...declaring that they would not regard themselves as weary, or thirsty, or as mortals at all, so long as they had such a leader" (*Alex.* 42.9-10).

Plutarch reminds his readers of Alexander's sexual restraint in dealing with female prisoners on at least three occasions and each time the example given is the same. Plutarch relates that when Stateira and her daughters were Alexander's hostages, they were treated well and remained untouched by both

¹⁷ *Lycurgus, Numa, Solon, Fabius Maximus, Pelopidas, Coriolanus, Aristides, Cato Major, Titus Flamininus, Crassus, Sertorius, Phocion, Cato Minor, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, Agis and Cleomenes, Aratus, Alexander.*

¹⁸ Plutarch plays 2nd century spin doctor for Alexander's drinking, stating that he may have filled his cup repeatedly but did not drink nearly as much as people thought he did (*Alex.* 21).

Alexander and his men (*Alex.* 21.11; 30.11). These two examples (derived from a longer list of occurrences) demonstrate that enkrateia, as one of Alexander's many virtues, established his fairness as a ruler and as a warrior.

In the *Life of Alexander*, *akolasía* (intemperance) is part of a demonstration that epitomizes the moral framework set out in *De virtute morali* and reveals Alexander as the exemplar of *sophrosunê* and *enkrateia*. The adjective *akolaston* is used by Plutarch to describe Bucephalus in the famous first encounter between the young Alexander and his horse (*Alex.* 6). Like the wild horse of desire described by Plato and Plutarch, Bucephalus is all untamed energy. That is, until Alexander tames him. In the taming of Bucephalus we see Alexander acting as pure Reason does in *De virtute morali* by bringing passion under control. In this case, Alexander tames the wild and uncontrolled horse "*agrion kai akolaston*" (*Alex.* 6.2).

Although the *Lives* of Demetrius and Antony repeatedly demonstrate their failure to control their behavior and all the political ramifications attendant on *akrasía* and *akolasía*, it is interesting to note that these two terms rarely if ever show up in their *Lives* and when they do, they are used somewhat differently than described in *De virtute morali*. Demetrius Poliorcetes, with respect to his sex-

ual behavior especially, seems to be the ultimate example of the *akolastês* who pursues pleasures without any internal arguments and who does not care about the effects of his pursuits on others. Plutarch narrates more than one event in which Demetrius demonstrates the sexual violence that was commonly associated with tyrants¹⁹. However, the term most descriptive of Demetrius does not surface in the text of his life. *Akrasía* is the term used to describe his liaison with Cratesipolis prior to a battle with Cassander's garrison in Megara. On this occasion, Demetrius left his troops in the field at Megara to detour to Patrae for the affair. Cassander's men learned of the tryst, attacked and carried off Demetrius' belongings and tent, while Demetrius escaped in shabby clothes (*Demetr.* 9.3-4). Comic relief to a battle ultimately won perhaps earns this incident the less harsh judgment of *akrasía* (*Demetr.* 9.4) even though Plutarch gives no indication that Demetrius gave a second thought to the possible consequences of his detour.

Antony, surprisingly, in spite of being faulted with *akrasía* in the *synkrisis*, is characterized in his biography as an *akolastês*: a leader whose unthinking lack of self-control has dire political consequences. Plutarch says of the Second Triumvirate that most Romans hated it and that they blamed Antony because of the uncontrolled life of plea-

¹⁹ PHILIP A. STADTER, 1995, pp.227-8.

sure into which he had immersed himself upon his return to Rome (*Ant.* 21.1-2). Some fifteen chapters later in the *Life of Antony*, Plutarch again cites the uncontrolled beast of the *Phaedrus* but this time it is Antony who is the uncontrolled beast of burden (*akolaston hypozugion*) and it is Eros that goads him rather than taming him. Plutarch tells us that, at the point in Antony's life when many thought that his passion for Cleopatra had been soothed away by Reason, it returned even stronger. "And finally like the stubborn and unmanageable beast of the soul, of which Plato speaks, he spurned away all saving and noble advice..." (*Ant.* 36.2.2). What Plutarch sees as a compulsion to return to Cleopatra, again earns Antony the hatred of the Roman people. By immersing himself in a life of excesses, Antony earned the blame for what many Romans believed was tyranny and ultimately a foreign threat to Rome itself.

So why does Plutarch's synkrisis for the *Lives* of Demetrius and Antony say that the main problem for both men was *akrasia* and not *akolasia*? Does the different deployment of the philosophical terminology between the *Moralia* and the *Lives* indicate a change in thinking or some kind of linguistic slippage? Probably not, since the essential difference between the *Moralia* and the *Lives* lies along the fault line of theory and practice. In the case of *enkrateia*, it is not the theoretical terminology but rather the metaphor of Passion's un-

tamed horse that unites the exempla of the *Lives* with the underlying framework of moral virtue. The image of the untamed horse (Passion/Desire) that resists domestication (self-control through the agency of Reason) was part of the moral lingua franca shared by Plutarch's particular audience as the result of their common *paideia*. There are two essential elements in the metaphor: the struggle and its outcome. The struggle between Desire and Reason places the metaphor in the center of the continuum between *sophrôsune* and *akolasia*. The outcome of that struggle determines whether the person is categorized as an *enkratês* or an *akolastês*. It is important to underscore the observation that a person earns the pejorative epithet of *akolastês* based on outcome whether or not there is an internal struggle. Plutarch demonstrated that human lives are a mixture of virtue and vice. His identification of *akrasia* not *akolasia* as the problem for Antony and Demetrius creates subtly delineated portraits of imperfect men who struggle with their passions before they fail to control themselves. Plutarch's biographies of Alexander, Antony and Demetrius reflect the Aristotelian belief that no human being possesses either pure *sophrôsune* or pure *akolasia*. In addition, *akolasia* implies such a degree of unmitigated evil that its cautionary value might be lost. Scarcely anyone in Plutarch's audience was likely to see himself as an *akolastês* in the mirroring exercise of the *Lives*. However, all would have experienced the inner struggles of

enkrateia and *akrasia*. Plutarch uses the *Lives* to demonstrate the politics of reining in or giving in to the excesses of desire. In the case of Alexander, *enkrateia*, although less than a virtue, demonstrated that he was more kingly than most. *Akrasia*, though less than ultimate vice, nevertheless brought the label of tyrant to both Demetrius and Antony.

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