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Plutarchus



Plutarchus ein natürlicher maister vnd außsprichender geschichtschreiber ein gepie
tet vñ amichtiger des kaisers Trayani ist zu dieser zeit an jnnem vmbfinghen vñ glawb
wirdigt er in fast großer achtung gewest. von dem Plutarates in seine vnsinnigen vñ glawb
Plutarchus der natürlich maister ist in dem heiligthumb schen der sitzen ein so vnsinnig in der welt
gewest das er leichtlich ein gepietter des kaisers hat mügen er damit werden. Difer willkür
chus tet sunden fleiß dem kaiser seinen unger vier ding eingepild. nemlich vñ er erboit
digt er sein selbs erfinder. der ambtelowt suchet vñ der vnderhanen lieb vñ vnsinnig
sachen in kriechischen vñ lateinischen man gar vil bücher von mancherley materien vñ vñ
kapfcher bey Trayano angenehme begabung gelangt.

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How to deal with the philosophical tradition? Some general rules in Plutarch's anti-Epicurean treatises*

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Abstract

In this contribution, Plutarch's rules for a good philosophical polemic, and the way in which he himself uses them in his anti-Epicurean treatises, are examined. First of all, a good philosophical discussion presupposes in Plutarch's view the fulfilment of several intellectual conditions, such as basic respect for the rules of logical reasoning and thorough knowledge of the matter under discussion. Secondly, these intellectual rules are completed by a set of moral demands: the whole discussion should be entirely free from the pernicious influence of the passions.

In his anti-Epicurean polemics, Plutarch shows how Colotes, and his master Epicurus, often break these intellectual and moral rules. The question remains, however, whether Plutarch himself observes his own rules in his attack on Epicurean philosophy. A thorough analysis shows that he often indeed faithfully observes his own intellectual and moral demands, but that, in spite of his attempt to set a good example, his polemical attacks are occasionally also at odds with his own rules.

Key-Words: Plutarch, *Moralia*, Colotes, Philosophical polemics.



Plutarch's rules for a good philosophical polemic

In the works of Plutarch of Chaeronea, especially in his anti-Epicurean treatises *Adversus Colotem* and *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* (henceforward:

Non posse), much information about ethical rules for a good polemic can be found. Plutarch never elaborated a systematic ethics of philosophical polemics, to be sure, but adopted a fairly coherent series of clear criteria, the relevance and importance of which

* A much more extensive version of this paper, which was read at a conference of the *Réseau thématique Plutarque* in Paris (September 13-14, 2007), has meanwhile appeared in *LEC76* (2008), 197-231.

he explains more or less in detail. In this contribution, I shall examine these criteria and analyse the way in which he uses them in the anti-Epicurean treatises. Finally, I will turn to the important question of whether Plutarch observes his own rules in his attack on Epicurean philosophy. It is clear that this can cast a new light on Plutarch's polemical writings, in that they can for the first time be evaluated on the basis of Plutarch's own criteria.

1.1. *Rem tene, verba sequuntur*: intellectual rules for a good debate

First of all, a good philosophical discussion presupposes in Plutarch's view the fulfilment of several intellectual conditions. If these intellectual demands obviously influence the course of the debate, they ultimately aim at an end that lies outside the debate, viz. the truth. Everyone should in an independent and critical way look for the truth¹, and the many silences in the discussions of the *Table Talks* strikingly illustrate the intellectual efforts which this process requires².

a) The first intellectual demand is basic respect for the rules of logical reasoning. Each speaker can freely choose his own starting points, but once he has made

and argued this fundamental choice, he should accept all of its implications (*Adv. Colot.* 1111C). It is clear that this demand works at a formal level, being concerned with the general and abstract rules of reasoning and argumentation. The ideal behind it is perfect consistency of one's doctrines (ἡ τῶν δογμάτων ὁμολογία; *De Stoic. rep.* 1033A).

However, it is important to note at this stage already that this demand of consistency also has important practical consequences. Since the speaker's theoretical starting points have direct implications for his actions, his consistency should also appear in his own life (ἡ τῶν δογμάτων ὁμολογία ἐν τοῖς βίοις; *ibid.*). The puzzling ambivalence in this phrase³ illustrates the complex intertwinement of intellectual and moral demands in Plutarch's thinking⁴, and thus from the very beginning also shows that Plutarch's standards will be high and extremely difficult to satisfy.

b) The formal demand of respect for the rules of logical reasoning is balanced by a second demand with regard to content. Important in this respect is the demand of *knowledge of the matter under discussion* (*Non posse* 1086D). The speaker's words should

¹ See ROSKAM (2004a) on Plutarch's conception of the ideal student and teacher.

² See VAN DER STOCKT (2000), p. 96-97.

³ On this ambivalence, see esp. BOYS-STONES (1997), p. 47-48.

⁴ See also *De prof. in virt.* 79F-80A, with the analysis of ROSKAM (2005), p. 276.

always rest on a thorough familiarity with the relevant literature. Dilettantism or superficiality is altogether wrong. Moreover, the polemicist should give evidence of *intellectual honesty* (*ibid.*). He should not isolate words from their context (cf. also *De sera num.* 548C) nor focus on *obiter dicta*, but deal with views which his opponent really defends and which are to be found everywhere in his writings (cf. *Adv. Colot.* 1108D and 1114C). This intellectual honesty further requires to introduce the opponent's views in the way in which he himself presents them (1120E), not in a way which is biased by polemical presuppositions.

Secondly, the polemical debate should be about the matter itself rather than about mere words (cf. *Adv. Colot.* 1114D). This does not imply of course that one should lightly pass over the specific use and meaning of terms, but in most cases terminological questions are in the end of secondary importance. The final goal of the philosophical debate is not a display of sophisticated ingenuity (ἐύρησιλογία)⁵ but looking for the truth.

These intellectual rules have important, albeit elementary, implications for the polemicist's language and style. They do *not* have direct

consequences for purity of style or degree of literary embellishment⁶, to be sure, but a discourse which respects the rules of logical argumentation presupposes at least a certain degree of discursive reasoning, which precludes bestial rouring (*Adv. Colot.* 1117A; cf. also 1125BC) and excessive praise (*De aud.* 45F; *Non posse* 1091C). A thorough knowledge of the matter under discussion, on the other hand, implies a serious debate devoid of scurrility and buffoonery (*Adv. Colot.* 1108B) and empty talk (*Non posse* 1088B; cf. *Adv. Colot.* 1114A). In short, the polemicist's general use of language and style should be in perfect conformity with the intellectual demands discussed above.

1.2. *Sine ira et studio*: moral rules for a good debate

Those intellectual rules are completed by a set of moral demands. If the former ultimately aim at a goal outside the debate (*viz.* the truth), the latter have their final end in the debate itself. They have to guarantee that the discussion proceeds along the lines of morally acceptable behaviour. Their goal, in short, is virtue, and more specifically virtuous conduct during the debate.

Such virtuous conduct requires that the whole discussion is entirely

⁵ A vice for which the Stoics are often blamed; see *De aud. poet.* 31E and *De comm. not.* 1070E on Chrysippus, and 1072F on Antipater. See also *De Stoic. rep.* 1033B.

⁶ Elsewhere, Plutarch makes clear that one may appreciate literature without regarding it as an end in itself; see e.g. *Con. praec.* 142AB; *De aud.* 42CD; VAN DER STOCKT (1992), p. 122-132.

free from the pernicious influence of the passions. There is no place for anger (*Adv. Colot.* 1108A), cowardice (1120C), self-conceit (1119BC), jealousy (*Non posse* 1086F; cf. *Adv. Colot.* 1121EF), or ambition (*Non posse* 1100AB; cf. *De lat. viv.* 1128A-C), and possible harsh opponents such as Heracleides, who may damage this ideal, are filtered away before the discussion starts⁷. Once again, the discussions in Plutarch's *Table Talks* may serve as paradigmatic examples. Different speakers develop their points of view in perfect tranquillity, with rational arguments, and in a relaxed atmosphere of amicable collaboration⁸. The anti-Epicurean writings, where moral rules for a good debate are thematised at different places (though sometimes only indirectly), and the *Table Talks*, where basically the same moral demands are illustrated by the actual *πρᾶξις* in Plutarch's circle, together provide a good picture of Plutarch's ideal.

This picture is completed by an interesting passage from *De profectibus in virtute*, where Plutarch underlines the importance of mildness in discussion

(80BC). This high moral ideal is further combined with two others that have to counterbalance one another. On the one hand, one should show respect for one's opponent (*Adv. Colot.* 1120C and 1124C); on the other hand, this respect should not preclude frankness (*παρησιία*), and one should not hesitate to refute erroneous views (*Non posse* 1086E and *Adv. Colot.* 1108BC)⁹.

As in the case of Plutarch's intellectual rules, his moral demands likewise make their influence felt in the domain of language and style. One should avoid excessive self-praise and boastfulness (*Non posse* 1088B and 1090A) motivated by ambition, and omit insults which run counter to the demand of respect for one's opponent and which have nothing to do with frankness (*Non posse* 1086F). A good intellectual and moral discussion, then, requires a sober and rational language and style. Or, in other terms, language should always serve virtue and truth¹⁰.

2. *Colotes* as exemplum e contrario

Since the above mentioned rules are closely connected to Plutarch's anti-

⁷ *Non posse* 1086E. Elsewhere too, Plutarch takes care to remove such possible nuisances; cf. *Sept. sap. conv.* 149B; *De def. or.* 413D; *De sera num.* 548AB; FLACELIÈRE (1959), p. 210; ZACHER (1982), p. 19; Albin (1993), p. 11.

⁸ See VAN DER STOCKT (2000), p. 94.

⁹ For Plutarch's view on the good use of frankness, see esp. the second part of his treatise *De adulate et amico* (65F-74E). In the anti-Epicurean treatises, Plutarch merely emphasises the importance of justified frankness without going into further detail.

¹⁰ Cf. VAN DER STOCKT (1990), p. 194.

Epicurean polemic, it makes sense to have a look at this broader context and examine how the rules function in Plutarch's argumentation. Such a study immediately encounters a certain ambivalence. Plutarch's general rules for a good debate often find their origin in his polemic against Colotes, but at the same time also constitute this polemic. They both generate and are generated by Plutarch's attack. This field of tension is important for a good understanding and correct evaluation of Plutarch's treatise *Adversus Colotem*. The treatise is not merely a defence of different philosophers against Colotes. Plutarch's defence rather takes the shape of a counterattack, and it is within the framework of this counterattack that the rules for a good discussion are formulated. The focus is not (primarily) on Colotes' opponents, but on his own interpretation and presentation of his philosophical predecessors. This focus by itself stimulates Plutarch's introduction and discussion of some general insights about the correct way of dealing with authors and texts, insights which are opposed to Colotes' approach. Always again indeed, Plutarch tries to show how Colotes, and his master

Epicurus, break several basic rules for a good discussion.

2.1. Colotes the idiot: failure to observe the intellectual rules

a) The general demand to observe the rules of logical reasoning is formulated in the context of Plutarch's discussion of Colotes' attack against Democritus. In Plutarch's view, the latter far surpasses Colotes and his master on this point. Democritus indeed posited indestructible atoms without quality as first principles and then drew the obvious conclusion that qualities are merely by convention¹¹. In Plutarch's eyes, this position is problematic¹² yet logically consistent: Democritus' mistake is not due to wrong argumentation but to his erroneous starting point (1111AB). Epicurus, on the other hand, accepts the hypothesis of atomism but not the consequences which, according to Plutarch, it directly entails, and thus proves guilty of the greatest shamelessness (1111B). This, moreover, turns out to be a typical feature of Epicurus' thinking. Plutarch goes on to list a whole series of parallel examples (*ibid.*), in an attempt to characterise Epicurean philosophy as a set

¹¹ For a discussion of Democritus' position see, e.g., BAILEY (1964), p. 178sq.; TAYLOR (1999), p. 175-179.

¹² That Plutarch prefers the doctrine of the four elements (prominent in *De primo frigido*) to atomism appears from *De sup.* 164F; *De Is. et Os.* 369A; *Quaest. conv.* 721D and esp. *Adv. Colot.* 1110E-1112C. Plutarch's refutation of atomism is discussed at length in BOULOGNE (2003), p. 85-106.

of mutually irreconcilable tenets¹³.

This interesting passage shows that the general demand of respect for the rules of logical reasoning is closely connected to a traditional eristic strategy which so often occurs in Plutarch, that is, the argument from inconsistency. That the inconsistencies which Plutarch mentions are far less problematic in Epicurus' perspective need not detain us. What is important here is the function of the general rule in Plutarch's polemic. It is not Plutarch's first aim to defend Democritus' views against Colotes. He rather tries to demonstrate that Colotes and his master are even more wrong than Democritus, and to that purpose makes use of his general rule: Democritus and Epicurus both defend wrong tenets, to be sure, but in addition to this, Epicurus also proves a clumsy thinker.

b) A good polemicist should also give evidence of thorough familiarity with his opponent's doctrines. In this respect, too, Colotes falls short of the ideal. Again and again, Plutarch blames the Epicurean for his complete ignorance of the doctrines which he discusses (*Adv. Colot.* 1109A; 1113B; 1115A-C; 1119CD; 1122B). This continuous emphasis on Colotes' ignorance does not merely disqualify the Epicurean on an intellectual level but also provides further polemical opportunities. Just like

the above mentioned demand of logical coherence, the demand of familiarity with the relevant material can be directly connected with a general eristic strategy, viz. the retort which turns the speaker's own words back upon himself (ἢ ἀντεπιστρέφουσα ἀπάντησις). Plutarch explains the power of such retorts in his *Political precepts* 810EF, where he is especially thinking of short and quick-witted replies peppered with humour. After having provided several concrete examples, Plutarch concludes that such retorts are also useful in other domains of one's life (811A).

And indeed, in Plutarch's anti-Epicurean treatises can be found many beautiful illustrations. The same principle there returns in a completely different context, in which acute rhetoric has to yield to a more theoretical argumentation. This may result in a less charming and humorous approach, to be sure, but basically, the technique remains the same. Plutarch frequently confronts his opponent with his own words, showing that Colotes is guilty of the charges he formulated himself against others (1109AB; 1109E; 1110EF; 1112A; 1114A; 1116C; 1117F; 1119F-1120A; 1121AB; 1122F-1123A).

This strategy, moreover, does not merely condition Plutarch's general polemical purpose but also brings

¹³ Cf. *Adv. Colot.* 1121E and his work *Περὶ τῶν Ἐπικουρείων ἐναντιωμάτων* (Lamprias catalogue n. 129).

about a significant increase in scale. For indeed, it is often as a result of this strategy that Plutarch's attack is not merely limited to Colotes himself but also includes his masters Epicurus and Metrodorus. More often than not, Plutarch indeed refers not to Colotes' own views but to those of Epicurus in order to turn general Epicurean views against Colotes¹⁴. This has two important implications: (1) Epicurus and Metrodorus are often attacked only indirectly, sharing the blows levelled at Colotes; and (2) Colotes himself appears as even more silly, in that he proves not only unfamiliar with the doctrines of his opponents but also with those of his own school.

Furthermore, Colotes' ignorance is aggravated by his excessive fault-finding concerning terminological issues and by his lack of intellectual honesty. That he is rather concerned with words than with content appears from his attacks on Empedocles (1112D-1113A) and Parmenides (1114D). Moreover, such a focus gives evidence of intellectual dishonesty, in that he merely argues about terms rather than about the matter itself. And even when he discusses content, he prefers to focus on isolated doctrines, omitting all of the opponents' arguments and giving their doctrines a different turn (1108D; 1114C; 1120DE).

Finally, Colotes too often acts the clown. Even his style is unbecoming and at odds with the demand of knowledge of the matter under discussion. For instead of questioning the views of his opponents through a careful and theoretical discussion, Colotes usually prefers to introduce (the implications of) their doctrines in a particularly concrete, simplistic, and unwelcome way. His style was entertaining and challenging, his objections were inspired by a down-to-earth approach that was especially interested in the concrete and practical consequences of the philosophical doctrines. His strongest weapons were common sense and humour. These weapons, however, at the same time opened up the possibilities for Plutarch's counterattack. For Colotes' polemical success was often bought at the price of considerable generalisation and simplification. This was his weakest flank, on which Plutarch launched his frontal attack. In this polemical counterattack, the rules for a good debate yield interesting opportunities because they expose the gaps in Colotes' own defence and undermine the cogency of his attack.

This implies that Plutarch's interest in the rules for a good debate is to an important extent rooted in the peculiar nature of Colotes' own work. This also

¹⁴ This raises the question as to whether Colotes also thematised his own Epicurean tenets in his work. In all likelihood the emphasis was entirely on the destructive attack; cf. Westman (1955), p. 87, n. 1 and p. 89-90. *Contra*: ISNARDI PARENTE (1988), p. 70.

explains why the issue is so much emphasised in the anti-Epicurean writings and much less so in the anti-Stoic treatises: the theme is directly connected with Colotes' Achilles heel (although it should be added that these rules are also influenced by Plutarch's own philosophical perspective).

2.2. Colotes the villain: failure to observe the moral rules

If Colotes and his master Epicurus frequently break the intellectual rules for a good debate, they likewise disregard several important moral rules. Epicurus' writing and doctrines prove to be motivated by an intense desire for renown (*Non posse* 1099F-1100A; cf. *Adv. Colot.* 1121EF). The Epicureans in general give evidence of immoderate self-conceit and arrogance (1119BC), and Colotes himself adds cowardice to these vices (1126C). He never reaches Plutarch's ideal of mildness – being foolish rather than mild; cf. 1113C – nor shows sincere respect for his opponents (1120C; cf. also 1124C).

Moreover, the Epicureans' moral wickedness is also revealed by their language and style. At the outset of *Non posse*, Plutarch mentions a whole catalogue of terms of abuse which the Epicureans used in order to insult their distinguished philosophical opponents

(1086EF)¹⁵. In Plutarch's view, this abusive language reveals the presence of base jealousy (1086F). On the other hand, Epicurus' great ambition and love of honour becomes evident in his annoying self-praise (1100BC; 1091C; 1097CD; cf. also *Adv. Colot.* 1117DE).

All this shows that the Epicureans fail to observe moral rules in their polemical discussions. Virtuous behaviour is for them as unattainable as the truth. And yet, it is remarkable that Colotes comes off fairly well on this point. In general, Plutarch's anti-Epicurean treatises contain far less relevant material concerning this issue than with regard to intellectual rules, and moreover, when Plutarch indeed thematises moral demands, his attacks are for the greatest part directed against Epicurus rather than against Colotes. This, of course, raises the question why Plutarch focuses his attention mainly on Epicurus' moral wickedness if he actually wants to attack Colotes. Has he forgotten about his real opponent? I see two reasons which explain this problem.

First of all, Plutarch in all likelihood found only few starting points for such polemic in Colotes' own work. We may presume that he used his opportunities whenever he could, but they were meagre and required inferences on Plutarch's part¹⁶. Moreover, at the

¹⁵ ZACHER (1982), p. 45-51. Cf. also Diogenes Laertius, 10,8, with SEDLEY (1976).

¹⁶ For instance: the fact that Colotes does not mention the Academics and Cyrenaics, which

outset of *Non posse*, Plutarch admits that Colotes' speech was very mild (εὐφημότατος) in comparison with that of Epicurus and Metrodorus (1086E). The first reason, then, is a heuristic one.

The second reason explains why Plutarch prefers to take advantage of his limited opportunities rather than omitting the whole issue all together: it yields an important polemical advantage. Character assassination is especially interesting when its victim is a philosopher, who claims to be virtuous. If it was probably difficult to attack Colotes directly, it remained possible to do it indirectly by placing him in a whole tradition of wickedness. Whereas Epicurus in *Adversus Colotem* usually shares the blows levelled at Colotes, in this case Colotes shares the blows levelled at Epicurus. This technique even yields two additional advantages. On the one hand, it considerably mitigates the onus of proof, in that Plutarch can depict Colotes as merely one example of well-known Epicurean wickedness. On the other hand, by avoiding a direct attack *ad hominem*, Plutarch better succeeds in suggesting that his own argument is completely free from passions such as anger or indignation. He merely recalls well-known facts about the Epicurean

tradition, refraining from personal attacks. If Colotes and Epicurus are morally blameworthy, Plutarch subtly suggests that he himself is doing much better. This brings us to our last question.

3. *Plutarch as exemplum ad imitandum?*

Plutarch elaborates a whole series of rules for a good discussion and uses them as a means to attack Colotes. At the same time, however, he *de facto* imposes these rules on himself too. The demand of consistency obviously requires that he himself practises what he preaches. This raises the interesting question of whether Plutarch observes his own rules. *A priori* we might expect he does, since many rules are explicitly thematised and argued. Plutarch can hardly allow himself to go wrong on this point¹⁷, even more so because he emphatically presents his treatise *Non posse* as an example of a correct philosophical polemic (1086D).

3.1. It is not surprising, then, that Plutarch indeed faithfully observes many of his own rules. He frequently displays his own knowledge, showing himself thoroughly familiar both with the Epicurean literature¹⁸ and with all

in Plutarch's view gives evidence of cowardice (*Adv. Colot.* 1120C), and the fact that he attacks all his predecessors together, which shows his boldness (1124C).

¹⁷ Cf. HERSHBELL (1992), p. 3366.

¹⁸ Cf. Aristodemus' *obiter dictum* ἔναγχος γὰρ κατὰ τύχην τὰς ἐπιστολάς διήλθον αὐτοῦ in *Non posse* 1101B. For Plutarch's knowledge of Epicureanism, see HERSHBELL (1992), p.

the philosophers attacked by Colotes. More than once, he explains to Colotes the precise meaning of the doctrines which the Epicurean has misunderstood (see, e.g., *Adv. Colot.* 1114B-F; 1115D-1116B; 1122B-D). Plutarch even goes a step further, explaining Colotes his own Epicurean doctrine, thus trying to beat his opponent on his own ground. He also avoids merely terminological questions and only discusses them when they are thematised in Colotes' attack (e.g. in 1112Asqq.; 1116E; 1120AB). Nor is his attack irrelevant: he explicitly emphasises that the doctrines which he quotes are all basic and well-known tenets of Epicurus (1108D), and he more than once repeats that his quotations can be traced back to Epicurus' own writings¹⁹ and that his attacks are free from abuse (*Non posse* 1096F). One may add that recent research has shown that Plutarch's verbatim quotations from Epicurus are usually accurate and reliable²⁰.

Plutarch no less faithfully observes his moral rules. At the outset of *Adversus Colotem*, he underlines that his reply to Colotes is not motivated by passions but by a certain sense of duty towards all the philosophers who were attacked by Colotes. In this case, silence would be shameful and the utmost frankness is necessary (1108BC). After Plutarch's

exposition, Zeuxippus adds that Plutarch should have been even more frank (*Non posse* 1086E). The suggestion is clear enough: in his counterattack, Plutarch continuously observes the most reasonable and moral standards.

3.2. This, however, is not the whole story, and it is time for a palinody. In spite of Plutarch's attempt to set a good example, his polemical attacks raise several questions with regard to his observance of his own rules.

If his familiarity with the relevant material cannot seriously be called into question, his intellectual honesty is not always obvious. Usually, he omits all Epicurean arguments and merely provides paraphrases of general tenets in all their radicalness (e.g. *Non posse* 1100D and *Adv. Colot.* 1111B; 1123A; 1124EF). Moreover, his presentation is not always unbiased. To give but one example, Epicurus' philosophy, in Plutarch's view, makes friendship less glorious and fondness for pleasure bolder, it does not value what is honourable for its own sake, and it throws our convictions about the gods into confusion (*Adv. Colot.* 1113F). Even if the doctrines concerned can easily be recognised, the way in which they are introduced is far from neutral. Plutarch's presentation already contains an evaluative component influenced by

3357-3363; BOULOGNE (2003), p. 13-17.

¹⁹ See, e.g., *Non posse* 1091A; *Adv. Colot.* 1108D; cf. *Non posse* 1095CD; 1101B; and 1087A (on Metrodorus).

²⁰ See HERSHBELL (1992), p. 3365-3368; cf. also BOULOGNE (2003), p. 17.

Platonic parameters. Such catalogues, in which the different constitutive elements lend credibility to each other without taking the precise meaning of the Epicurean tenets into account, do not contribute to a penetrating and fair discussion.

Elsewhere, Plutarch's discussion is more nuanced and he often points to the details of Epicurus' position²¹. Even this, however, does not always guarantee the fairness of Plutarch's argumentation, as may appear from one illustrative example out of many, viz. his discussion of Epicurus' view on the heating effect of wine. A series of lengthy quotations shows that Epicurus' refused to draw general conclusions on this issue and merely contended that a given amount is heating for a given constitution in a particular condition and chilling for another one (*Adv. Colot.* 1109E-1110B). The whole passage may be regarded as a typical example of Epicurus qualifying philosophy. In Plutarch's view, on the other hand, the passage merely shows that Epicurus basically defends Democritus' view, attacked by Colotes, that no object is any more of one description than of another (1110B). This is an application of his polemical strategy of ἀντεπιστρέφουσα ἀπάντησις, which results in ascribing to Epicurus a philosophy which levels out differences rather than using them for further qualification.

Finally, Plutarch's polemical style is occasionally at odds with his demand of knowledge of the matter under discussion. More than once, he proves guilty of the same clownish presentation as Colotes. The most obvious example is Plutarch's caricature of Epicurus' philosophy of pleasure as a continuous pursuit of cake and sex (*Non posse* 1093C; 1093F; 1094A; 1097D; 1099B; *De lat. viv.* 1129B).

On the moral level, Plutarch's attacks are likewise occasionally at odds with his own rules. Twice he uses the rhetorical means of *praeteritio* in order to attack the Epicureans in passing (*Non posse* 1097D and 1100D). These two instances of *praeteritio* are morally ambivalent. If Plutarch is right that a discussion of these issues would be an indication of quarrelsomeness (1100D), the morally correct attitude is omitting them altogether rather than mentioning them in passing. One may doubt whether Plutarch's references are indeed *sine ira et studio*.

If such *praeteritio* is still ambivalent, Plutarch's sarcasm is far less so. More than once, vitriolic sarcasm drips from his pen. The convictions of both Epicurus (*Non posse* 1103E) and Colotes (*Adv. Colot.* 1117D) are praised as wise, and in this context, Plutarch's repeated reference to the diminutives

²¹ See, e.g., *De tranq. an.* 465F-466A (discussed in ROSKAM (2007), p. 52-54); *Non posse* 1087C; 1089D; 1097A; *Adv. Colot.* 1118DE and 1125C.

Κωλωταρᾶν and Κωλωτάριον (1107E and 1112D) are relevant as well. One begins to wonder how mild Plutarch actually is and one may even begin to feel some sympathy with the offended Heracleides (*Non posse* 1086E).

Even more problematic finally is the torrent of abuse which can be found in Plutarch's polemics. If Epicurus' abusive language gives evidence of jealousy (*Non posse* 1086F), the question may be raised as to whether Plutarch himself is completely free from this vice. In any case, his insults illustrate the limited degree of respect which he has for his opponents. If he occasionally showed a certain respect for them²², he respected them as philosophers, never as *Epicurean* philosophers²³.

4. Conclusion

From Plutarch's anti-Epicurean treatises can be gathered a whole set of rules for a good philosophical polemic. His ideal is that of a friendly, well-ordered, and reasonable discussion characterised by competent argumentation and aiming at the truth. A philosophical debate, in short, should be a pleasant conversation rather than a boxing match.

Nevertheless, Plutarch's anti-Epicurean treatises often more closely resemble the latter than the former. Even such a boxing match, however, may sometimes present a beautiful scene, with all of the participants punching above the waist. Such spectacle can be found in Plutarch, and it would be unfair to neglect all of his criticisms without consideration. Even if none of his arguments, I think, would in the end succeed in convincing Epicurus, he sometimes raises interesting and pertinent questions which may provide other equally valuable alternatives²⁴. His polemical attacks may have less value as a direct refutation of Epicurus but they remain important as a sensible defence of his own Platonism²⁵.

Often, however, Plutarch's boxing match against Colotes degenerates and the rules of the game are broken. Poor Colotes finds himself not in a boxing match but in a pancratium, in which (except biting and gouging; see Philostratus, *Im.* 2,6,3) everything is permitted. Colotes was long dead and unable to reply to Plutarch's attacks, but if he would have been able to defend himself, his answer would in

²² HERSHBELL (1992), p. 3364.

²³ ROSKAM (2004b), p. 272.

²⁴ See esp. the study of BOULOGNE (2003).

²⁵ Cf. HERSHBELL (1992), p. 3373. An analogous conclusion holds true for Plutarch's anti-Stoic attack in *De virtute morali*; see INGENKAMP (1999).

all probability have been characterised by Epicurean laughter and scoffing, in short, by precisely that biting and gouging that was strictly forbidden in Plutarch's *pancratium*.

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