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Plutarch's Alexander: an Endorsement of Platonism and Living as a Philosopher

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Man has often had an inclination to promote his way of living to his fellow man. Believing that his way of approaching life is superior to all others, he has defended and enforced his views against and upon others. He has done this by way of reasoning and by way of violence. Although most instances of this natural desire are recognized in the form of wars and acts of violence, there have also been many other prominent instances involving peaceful reasoning, such as the revolutionary movements of Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi. Plutarch, a Greco-Roman historian and writer, is one noteworthy figure who also sought to persuade others through peaceful methods, specifically through his writing. What has enabled his name to be remembered through the centuries has undoubtedly been his greatest work, *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, a work more commonly referred to as *Parallel Lives*. By examining this book, and the account on Alexander the Great in particular, readers can discover a peaceful and effective means of spreading their beliefs to others. Through witty rhetoric and other persuasive writing techniques, readers will learn how Plutarch uses Alexander's celebrity status of the time to promote Platonism, a popular school of thought following the teachings of Plato, and living the life of a philosopher. Why Plutarch wants to promote Platonism, the life of a philosopher is also explored in this analysis, and corroborated through several Classical period historians. Finally, Plutarch's attempt to paint Alexander as a Platonist and a worthy idol representing all philosophers will open the reader to a few new fundamental beliefs from a distant era of the past regarding living an ethical, self-governed, and virtuous life.

Before setting out to examine Plutarch's account of Alexander, some background information on Plutarch's life will aid in comprehending the intensity of his belief in Platonism and living as a philosopher. Plutarch was born in the central Greek city of Chaeronea during the 1st century B.C.

Around the age of twenty, he began studying in Athens under the guidance of a Platonist philosopher named Ammonius (Plutarch, v). This mentorship was what founded Plutarch's interests in Plato's philosophy, interests that would later develop into a strong-rooted, passionate belief and devotion. After his education, Plutarch returned to his native city where he would spend the remainder of his life. Chaeronea was also near Delphi, so Plutarch ended up serving various positions in Delphi due to the proximity, most notably his stint as priest of Apollo (Plutarch, v). This suggests that Plutarch may have been a highly religious individual on top of being a philosopher, a fact that resonates well with Platonism's belief in the elevation of the soul and connection with the divine during and after life.

In his native city, Plutarch established himself as a prolific writer of philosophical works. Most of these works were in the form of dialogue, which was the primary form that comprised half of his literary output (Karamanolis, sec. 1). By selecting this choice of writing style, we clearly see Plutarch's idolization of Plato; this is because Plato wrote most of his philosophical pieces, including the famous *Republic*, entirely in dialogue, and imitation is the sincerest form of veneration (Karamanolis, sec. 2). Other distinguished philosophical works that Plutarch wrote were manuscripts against Stoicism and Epicureanism, two other prominent philosophies of his time that criticized Platonism. The translator of *Parallel Lives*, John Dryden identifies this defensive stance in Plutarch: "As an exponent of Platonism, he vigorously attacked the positions of the Stoics and Epicureans" (Plutarch, pg. v). Plutarch clearly had a strong belief in Platonism, as seen here by his defense of the philosophy against critics. It can be contended to be the primary factor driving him to spread his philosophy to others.

Now we move to the primary source of information, *Parallel Lives*, to examine Plutarch's account of Alexander and his clever persuasive tactics. *Parallel Lives* is a historical-biographical account of various important Greek and Roman figures. "Intended as moral portraits rather than historical interpretations, the [*Paralle*] *Lives* are an incomparably rich trove of the facts and legends that Plutarch tirelessly collected, and an epitome of Greco-Roman concepts of character" (Plutarch, vi). Plutarch's motive to write the text appears to be more than just giving a historical-biographical account of heroic Greeks and Romans. This is because Plutarch wrote the *Parallel Lives* at a time when Greeks and Romans loved to read stories about their favorite warriors of the past (Plutarch, xxii), a major clue indicative of Plutarch's motivations. Fueled by the intensity of his beliefs, Plutarch sought to capitalize on his fellow citizens' adoration of ancient heroes to endorse what he believed in. What more effective way to do this than to use peoples' heroes as champions of your beliefs? Roger Kimball, an editor and publisher of *The New Criterion*, recognizes this witty exploitation: "Plutarch pursued this high-minded procedure [writing *Lives*] not out of primness or timidity but because he thought it the most effective propaganda for virtue" (4). Close examination of Plutarch's account of Alexander will clearly show his mission in action.

To begin, the format with which Plutarch writes about Alexander indicates that he is promoting Platonism:

It must be borne in mind that my design is not to write histories, but lives. And the most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men; sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of

Gonzalez: Plutarch's Alexander: an Endorsement of Platonism and Living as a
their characters and inclinations, than the most famous sieges, the greatest armaments,
or the bloodiest battles whatsoever (139).

The important message to take from this passage is Plutarch's emphasis on writing about lives and not histories. Peoples' full attention is drawn much stronger by compelling stories than by impersonal factual information. Stories often deliver messages much more successfully than impersonal lectures do. We also see Plutarch acknowledging that his writing focuses on instances highlighting personal character and not on details of achievements. Character and virtue are important philosophical elements in Platonism due to their necessity in elevating one's soul to the divine—a key achievement according to the philosophy. Conversely, the egotistical elements of material wealth, fame, and power only restrain one's soul from connection to the divine, hence explaining why Plutarch doesn't write about them.

A good example supporting this claim is a passage on the battle of Gaugamela. Alexander has Darius in his sight as he pursues the fleeing King of Persia, Plutarch writes. Upon imminent capture of the Persian King, news is brought to Alexander that Parmenio, his right-hand companion, needs urgent assistance because his troops are about to break. "Alexander, though he was not a little vexed to be so recalled and hindered from pursuing his victory, yet concealed the true reason from his men, caused a retreat to be sounded" (167). Instead of capturing Darius and obtaining the Persian Empire, Alexander chooses to help his close companion who is in dire need of help. By choosing companionship over territorial domain, Plutarch highlights Alexander's choice of righteousness over personal glory, a choice in-line with the Platonist philosophy and a chance to win over the readers' emotions. Being persuasive means capitalizing on every available opportunity to gain public approbation.

Another style Plutarch uses to effectively promote Platonism is his minimal interjection of personal commentary in instances revealing Alexander as a Platonist. Whenever Plutarch describes an event where Alexander's virtuous character is on display, he refrains from making any commentary because it makes the account, and Alexander's actions, debatable. This makes the validity of the account weaker, swaying the audience away from fully believing in Alexander's Platonist qualities. For comparison purposes, take an account by Arrian, another Greco-Roman historian who uses personal commentary in his account of Alexander's treatment of Darius' wife and daughter:

Nor did [Alexander] neglect Darius' mother, wife, and children. Alexander sent Leonnatos to the women, having instructed him to inform them that Darius was alive. Alexander had given his consent that they be waited upon, honored, and addressed as queens, since the war against Darius was not personal but for domain. Though I [Arrian] have recorded these incidents, I do not claim that they are either authentic or entirely implausible. But if they did take place, I commend Alexander for the compassion he showed the women (77).

The commentary by Arrian, whose historical-biographical account of Alexander called *Anabasis Alexandrou* comes a century after Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, makes the event and Alexander's true motives questionable. Now look at Plutarch's account on the same event:

But as he [Alexander] was going to supper, word was brought him that Darius's mother and wife and two unmarried daughters, being taken among the rest of the prisoners, upon the sight of Darius' chariot and bow, were all in mourning and sorrow, imagining him to be dead. After a little pause, more lively affected with their affliction than with his own success, he sent Leonatus to them, to let them know Darius was not dead, and that they need not fear any harm from Alexander, who made war upon Darius only for dominion. Esteeming it more kingly to govern himself than to conquer his enemies, Alexander sought no intimacy with any one of them (155).

We see no personal commentaries by Plutarch in his account, only emphasis on Alexander's virtuous character. With no commentary, the reader is left with no doubts behind Alexander's motives. Any section of a story that is annotated with personal opinion automatically biases readers' interpretations, and must therefore be used with caution when trying to persuade others.

Also worthy of notice is how Plutarch highlights two important details in the account that Arrian does not. One, he draws attention to Alexander's priority to care for others over obtaining personal glory; two, he magnifies Alexander's self-governance. Tim Whitmarsh comments: "This episode inspires a memorable Plutarchan: 'it is more kingly to rule oneself than rule others.' Moreover, Alexander is presented as particularly amenable to philosophic instruction" (181). It is generally accepted that Arrian's writing on Alexander is much more historically accurate than Plutarch's writing, like a lecture versus a story. Why then does Plutarch shape this episode the way he does? Again he is emboldening Platonic values and winning public approbation.

On the flip side, Plutarch does interject commentary when mentioning times of Alexander not acting ideally. By doing so, he diminishes the lack of Platonist values shown by the leader while still incorporating well known historical events in his account, making it more plausible to his readers. His commentaries serve to guide the readers' interpretations and reactions in a direction he wants. Historically, Alexander was a spontaneous, emphatic individual that was not very philosophical in his nature, let alone Platonist. Whitmarsh goes even further claiming that "Alexander's behavior is hardly unambiguously that of a philosopher-king, and at several points, we see him betraying the autocratic intolerance typical of a tyrant" (181). With commentary, Plutarch mitigates this truth in the eyes of his readers. An example exhibiting this comes in a line developed after Alexander conquers Babylon:

the king [Alexander] himself, started from his seat, and with a chaplet of flowers on his head and a lighted torch in his hand, led them the way...for they hoped the burning and destruction of the royal palace was an argument that he [Alexander] looked homeward, and had no design to reside among the barbarians. Thus some writers give their account of this action, while others say it was done deliberately; however, all agree that he soon repented of it, and gave order to put out the fire (170).

Plutarch here diminishes Alexander's lack of reason in burning down the palace by commenting that other historians agree he repented of his action. By appealing to a majority consensus, he makes Alexander's act less deplorable, and diverts attention away from Alexander's initial lack of self governance to the positive notion that he corrected his action, thus leaving the reader in the

end with a better impression of Alexander's character than his action warranted. Now compare this to Arrian's account of the same event:

He [Alexander] set the Persian palace on fire against the advice of Parmenion, who argued that it was ignoble to destroy what was now his own property. But Alexander declared that he wanted to pay back the Persians, who, when they invaded Greece, had razed Athens and burned the temples, and to exact retribution for all the other wrongs they had committed against the Greeks. It seems to me [Arrian], however, that in doing this Alexander was not acting sensibly, nor do I think there could be any punishment for Persians of a bygone era (130-131).

Note that the more historically accurate account by Arrian states that Alexander did not consequently order the fires to be put out, even against the advice of a trusted companion. This conflicts with Plutarch's account and clearly shows that Plutarch is trying to mitigate Alexander's wrong act. That way, Alexander remains established as the well esteemed, virtuous, and philosophic hero. With strategic use and disuse, Plutarch uses personal commentary as an intelligent means of keeping his audiences' attention where he wants it.

We've seen that Plutarch uses and expands on verifiable accounts of Alexander, and now we'll see that he also includes fictional events to propagandize Alexander as a Platonist. One of the clearest examples of this is in a passage Plutarch constructs in the later part of Alexander's campaign. During Alexander's voyage back from India, Plutarch introduces a short narrative involving ten Indian philosophers called gymnosophists. In the narrative, he says that Alexander questions each one of the Indian philosophers, all of whom had supposedly taken part in a revolt against one of Alexander's cities. Alexander makes the eldest gymnosophist judge, and he gives the worst answer amongst them. After questioning each one, Alexander turns to his judge and the judge says that each one answered worse than another. Alexander replies he will die first then for giving such a sentence. "Not so, O king," replied the gymnosophist, "unless you said falsely that he should die first who made the worst answer" (190-191). In conclusion, he gave them presents and dismissed them. This narrative provided by Plutarch sets up Alexander's character on a golden platform because though he is outwitted by the clever gymnosophist, instead of acting rashly and sentencing them all to death in the wake of being outsmarted, he coolly maintains his self-governance and acknowledges his defeat. Plutarch explicitly capitalizes on Alexander's self-governance and admittance of ignorance, two common Platonist values. The inclusion of smart philosophers in the event also promotes living as a philosopher because it shows the wit and clever thinking they possess.

However, the most interesting part of the narrative is that it most likely never took place. Arrian for one does not justify the account. He says that Alexander executed all of the Brahmans, who were the wise men among the Indians that had taken part in the revolt (252-253). There is no mention of gymnosophists and no mention of pardon. This makes the historical legitimacy of Plutarch's event highly questionable given that Arrian's account is much more historically accurate. This notion aligns with the reasoning of Hammond, an expert on Macedonian history:

Because Arrian told of the hanging of Brahmans and not of any pardon such as our episode [by Plutarch] reports, we may exclude Ptolemy and Aristobulus as authors of

the episode; and we may also conclude that the episode is unhistorical, in that Aristobulus would surely have reported such a pardon as supporting his own view of Alexander, and his report would have been included readily by Arrian (120-121).

Hence, because Arrian does not tell of such an event, Plutarch can be found to have provided a fictional event in his account of Alexander. We've seen Plutarch try to persuade his readers by selectively commenting and not commenting on certain episodes of Alexander, and now we see that he goes so far as to even create fictional events to deliver his message. As already mentioned, Plutarch's intention is evident, but would his audience of the time have known of this craft? Such extrapolation can be risky when trying to persuade others because if caught, reader approbation is often immediately lost indefinitely. Creating events should therefore be used with extreme caution during persuasion.

Finally, events involving interaction between Alexander and worldly philosophers is another common motif in Plutarch's persuasive design in promoting Platonism and the life of a philosopher. Besides the fictional episode between Alexander and the Indian gymnosophists, Plutarch gives several other instances of communication between Alexander and philosophers. It must be kept in mind though that Alexander was not as philosophical as Plutarch tries to depict him, and as we have seen, Plutarch is even willing to invent instances to rectify the matter. David Johnson finds that "Alexander had a longstanding interest in philosophy, perhaps originating in his training under the great Aristotle himself. But as time went on Alexander seems to have become rather less philosophical" (n. pag.).

In one passage, Plutarch portrays Alexander against this notion when he describes an encounter between Alexander and the philosopher Diogenes. In the encounter, Alexander finds Diogenes laid out in the sun. Diogenes recognizes Alexander upon his approach and raises himself to look at him. Alexander responds to the confrontation by kindly asking him if he wants anything. Diogenes replies, "Yes, I would like you to stop blocking my sun!" The answer shocked Alexander and he lauded the courage of the philosopher. Alexander went on to state that if he were not Alexander, he would choose to be Diogenes" (149). Instead of acting rashly toward the philosopher, who boldly tells Alexander to move, Alexander is left in such awe of Diogenes that he holds the philosopher as a worthy replacement of himself. This encounter undoubtedly promotes Platonism and living the life of a philosopher by drawing attention to Alexander's self-governance and his admiration of Diogenes' audacity. Whitmarsh seconds the thought by saying the passage "presented Alexander as particularly amenable to philosophic instruction" (181). In an interesting change of tactics, we see Plutarch shifting attention more towards the philosopher's actions than Alexander's. It is as if he is transferring the readers' regard that has been built up in Alexander to the different philosophers he encounters, making them accepted by the readers as well.

In another situation, we find Plutarch performing the same function in a passage involving an Egyptian philosopher and Alexander:

Among the sayings of one Psammon, a philosopher, whom he [Alexander] heard in Egypt, he most approved of this, that all men are governed by God, because in everything, that which is chief and commands is divine. But what he pronounced

Gonzalez: Plutarch's Alexander: an Endorsement of Platonism and Living as a
himself upon this subject was even more like a philosopher, for he said, God was the
common father of us all, but more particularly of the best of us (161).

Here we see Alexander approving of the Platonic concept of there being only one divine governor of the universe. This runs against the notion that Alexander believed in multiple gods, and again displays Plutarch's aim in action. The truth of the matter is that Alexander really did believe in multiple gods, including the belief that the Greek god Zeus was his father (Arrian, 104). Plutarch includes this passage because it makes out Alexander to be monotheistic as are most philosophers. George Karamanolis provides us with better understanding behind Plutarch's aim:

Plutarch distinguishes sharply between God or the divine and gods. The latter are various divine beings which appear in different religions and with many names, while God or the divine indicates the divine substance, which is a unity including all divine beings in it. God rules over the world and provides over it, but being supreme, father of gods and men alike, he remains transcendent (sec. 4).

Thus from another influential encounter between Alexander and a philosopher, we glean from these passages that Plutarch selectively uses philosophers of all kinds to promote Platonism: "Plutarch uses philosophers . . . only instrumentally in order to advance through them Plato's doctrines" (Karamanolis, sec. 2). He also uses them as connection points to transfer reader regard from Alexander to philosophers of all kinds. Alexander, therefore, is not only a model of Plutarch's philosophy and way of life but he is also an advocate.

In summary, it is evident that Plutarch has a motive behind writing *Parallel Lives*. By writing about prominent Greek and Roman figures at a time when his audience's favorite pastime was to read about their stories, Plutarch uses an effective method of propaganda. Upon analyzing his account of Alexander, his motive is evidently seen to be promotion of his philosophy, Platonism, and endorsement of the life of a philosopher. Using Arrian's account of Alexander as a historically sound control for comparison, many instances depicting Plutarch's motive in action can be clearly distinguished and identified. Plutarch models Alexander as a Platonist and a philosopher-by-heart by selectively capitalizing on historically and fictionally based instances of greatness—greatness such as virtuousness in battle, self-governance in life, reverence of philosophers, and positive interaction with various philosophers. This then works to convince his readers that they too should follow Platonist philosophy and live as philosophers. Considering Plutarch's background, this is not surprising. Having been first taught by a Platonist philosopher and then proceeding to write many works defending Platonic philosophy in Plato's characteristic dialogic format, he was surely establishing himself as an active proponent of Platonism and being a philosopher.

Further inquiry into Plutarch's other accounts of *Parallel Lives* would be necessary to maintain whether his motive of promoting Platonic philosophy and living as a philosopher holds throughout the entire book. Having drawn only from his account of Alexander, this analysis only provides a single explanation for Plutarch's aim behind the work. However, Plutarch's passionate belief in Platonist philosophy and living as a philosopher, as seen in his account of Alexander the Great, does seem to be a highly convincing motive for him to write *Parallel Lives*: "Plutarch himself says he wrote the *Lives* for the improvement of others, assuming that the actions of virtue will instigate emulation in the reader" (Karamanolis, sec. 7). Plutarch's account displays master