PHILOSOPHY IN SOCIETY VIRTUES AND VALUES IN PLUTARCH

José Ribeiro Ferreira Luc van der Stockt Maria do Céu Fialho Editors



KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN IMPRENSA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA Leuven-Coimbra, 2008



JOSÉ RIBEIRO FERREIRA, LUC VAN DER STOCKT & MARIA DO CÉU FIALHO EDITORS

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Fabius Maximus' Loyalty

Vitae Plutarchi Cheronei novissime post Jodocum Badium Ascensium longe diligentius repositae maioreque diligentia castigatae, cum copiosiore verioreque indice, nec non cum Aemilii Probi vitis, una cum figuris, suis locis apte dispositis, Venetiis 1516, fol . 65v

> LEUVEN - COIMBRA 2008

KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT LEUVEN IMPRENSA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA

First published 2008

- © Universiteit Katholieke Leuven
- © UNIVERSIDADE COIMBRA

Published by

Imprensa da Universidade Coimbra Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra Rua da Ilha, nº 1 3000-033 Coimbra (Portugal) Email: imprensauc@ci.uc.pt URL: http://www.uc.pt/imprensa_uc

ISBN: 972-989-8074-73-7 Legal Deposit: MA-140-2009

Printed in Spain by IMAGRAF IMPRESORES, S.A. c/ Nabucco 14 29006 Málaga Tfno. 952328597

Frontispiece:

FABIUS MAXIMUS AND MINUCIUS (Francesco da Siena, Grottaferrata, Palazzo Abbaziale). We are grateful to the Archimandrita of the "Monastero Esarchico di Santa Maria di Grottaferrata", P. Emiliano Fabbricatore, for the authorization to reproduce this picture.

From Flower to Chameleon. Values and Counter-Values in Alcibiades' Life*

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In many of Plutarch's *Vitae* we notice a type of agonistic tension between natural values, which can be inferred from the initial potential that the character of the biographized seems to show from the very beginning and from the external stimuli or events that are often put to the test and impose themselves on that promising nature. The final shape of the hero's *ethos* is a result of that struggle, whether this outcome was already visible in his youth, in his adulthood or at the end of his life.

An example of the first alternative, among others, is that of the young Alcibiades in whom Socrates himself recognised signs of *euphyia* and *arete* beyond that of his external beauty, which needed help to develop through philosophy (Alc. 4.1.)¹.

On the other hand, Theseus fits the portrait of the type of hero who would become lost in adulthood despite a promising youth, which was guided by the assimilated exemplum of Heracles. As a matter of fact Heracles represented to the young Theseus a factor of self-teaching and of determination of his behaviour. Theseus' courage and philanthropia lost their coherence and disappeared from his ethos when the founder of Athens succumbed to a kind of philautia as a result of his desire to satisfy his impulses. We can mention Demetrius as an example for the third possibility. As a prisoner of Seleucus, he lost his moderation and gave in to wine and food in the final years of his life because there was no hope of regaining his freedom (Dem. 52).

José Ribeiro Ferreira, Luc Van der Stockt & Maria do Céu Fialho (Edd.), *Philosophy in Society - Virtues and Values in Plutarch*, Leuven-Coimbra, 2008, pp. 107-116.

This article was written as part of the research project of the Centre for Classical and Humanistic Studies at the University of Coimbra.

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Therefore, values and counter-values, vices and virtues are shown in the behaviour of each hero so as to convey ultimately the worth of the pedagogical example of his biography. As Pérez Jiménez pointed out, this dynamic definition of character through actions is of Aristotelian origin – we can see all this action philosophy analysed in Nicomachean Ethics². However, the power of an inborn arete, which represents the Platonic superiority of the soul over the body, is present in Plutarch's acknowledgement of the existence of potential moral qualities right from the beginning in a somewhat young human being. These are reinforced by an education which prepares him to face external agents such as the tyche and its caprices or the pressure of the social environment. This confrontation results in the defining of the "final character", in accordance with the moral strength of the hero, and it is in this confrontation that Plutarch wants to lead the reader to assess the strength of education (whether it reinforces a good physis or not) or of Fortune, however cruel, unstable or overly prosperous it might be.

Alcibiades' life becomes particularly interesting in this context. Curiously, in the same initial chapter where Plutarch emphasizes the positive influence of Socrates' presence, he also says the following about the fascinating and controversial Alcibiades (4.2.)³:

For there is no man whom Fortune (tyche) so envelops (perieschen exothen) and compasses about with the so-called good things of life that he cannot be reached by the bold and caustic reasoning of philosophy, and pierced to the heart.

And it will be on Alcibiades' *Life* that I shall focus this study on. The text quoted is part of the initial chapters, apparently disorganized in manner, which deal with the ascendancy, and some childhood and adolescence episodes of this character. There is no prologue as such in this biography⁴ and so Plutarch goes straight to the subject: Alcibiades is a descendant of epic saga heroes and is also related to the Alcmeonides' on his mother's side. His father fought the Persians in Artemisia and

For the pedagogical importance of philosophy on the development of virtues and on the way to a higher qualitative *eudaimonia* of the soul in Plutarch see F. Becchi, "Plutarco fra platonismo e aristotelismo: la filosofia comme paideia dell'anima", in A. Pérez Jiménez, J. García López & R. Mª AGUILAR (eds.), *Plutarco, Platón y Aristoteles. Actas del V Congreso Internacional de la I.P.S. (Madrid-Cuenca, 4-7 de Mayo de 1999), Madrid*, 1999, pp. 25-43.

A. PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ, "Actitudes del hombre frente a la tyche en las Vidas Paralelas de Plutarco" BIEH 7 (1973) 103 sqq. The author points out the importance given by Plutarch to the interaction character/circumstances: "Este es, en esencia, el núcleo central de la biografía ... Uno de estos elementos de interacción es la tyche, que situa a los personages en un verdadero 'dilema tragico'".

For Plutarch's quotations, see B. Perrin's translation, Plutarch's Lives IV. Alcibiades and Coriolanus. Lysander and Sula, London-Cambridge-Massachusetts, 1963.

P. STADTER, "The Proems of Plutarch's *Lives*" ICS 13 (1988) 275-295 distinguishes two kinds of prologues and includes this one in the group of the "integrated proems".

the Boeotians in Coronea, where he died. Pericles and Ariphon were his tutors, a Laconian woman was his wet maid and Zopyrus was his teacher. Here Plutarch anticipates the role of Socrates' presence in Alcibiades' life as a determining element in his future luck: the *eunoia* and the *philantropia* of the philosopher contributed significantly to the *doxa* that he would possess (1.3).

Plutarch refers to the imperishable physical beauty that followed him up to his death, and then to the inconsistencies in his character revealed in adulthood and which he associates with pragmasi megalois kai tychais polytropois (2.1.). In these proleptic comments the author shows how a philoneikos and a philoprotos would come to be seen in Alcibiades and then he returns to his childhood and adolescence to illustrate through short anecdotes the character that was to come. His rebelliousness towards his masters reveals just how contrary this promising young man is to the influence of education and how well he can intuitively play with circumstances for his own profit and manipulate others with his skills. Th. Duff shows how this apparently chaotic sequence of initial chapters in the life of Alcibiades has its own semiotics⁵. Plutarch plays with a type of prefiguration of what will be the very anarchy in the life of Alcibiades, although the episodes mentioned corroborate his extreme and incredible ability to react quickly to situations and his boldness. A more superficial reading would lead the reader to expect to be in the presence of a genius, which he was, of whom we would expect a brilliant future.

In the same way, the end of Alcibiades' life symbolically condenses the synthesis of his own existence. It is an ending that is surrounded by uncertainty, and is controversial, scandalous and ambiguous, as seen through the feminine make-up he appears with in the premonitory dream and through the courtesan clothes with which Timandra covers him⁶.

This ambiguity reminds us of the wrestling episode in his youth where his opponent accuses him of resorting to unorthodox means (2.2.)⁷:

You bite, Alcibiades, as women do!

The process of symbolic condensation is one of Plutarch's favourite writing resources which he uses to strengthen the suggestive power of the final scene over that of the journey leading up to it. The endings of other biographies show it as well, such as in the case of *Theseus*, *Cato the Younger* or *Caesar*. In this last one the narrative includes the end of the assassinated person, of the assassin and of the

⁵ Th. DUFF, "Plutarch on the Childhood of Alkibiades (Alk. 2-3)" PCPS 49 (2003) 94 sqq.

On the significance of dreams in Plutarch's Lives see F. E. Brenk "The Dreams in Plutarch's Lives" Latomus 34 (1975) 336-349.

⁷ TH. DUFF, op. cit. 96 sqq., points out this episod, among others, as a prefiguration of the sexual ambiguity of the biographized, which will reach its highest level at the end of this Life.

Roman republic. In fact, this is typical of poetic narrative and causes the reader to empathize with the text beyond reason and holds him/her through the suggestive and representative effects of the *poiesis*.

Blood ties link Alcibiades to the renowned Alcmeonides', who were also associated with a case of sacrilege in the past. The courage of the father seems to mirror the son's future military achievements. It is also significant that in Plutarch's speech, he tells of Alcibiades' father fighting against the Persians and the Greeks while points out Pericles' role as a tutor, whose influence and example in fact seem to mean nothing to the young man, and simultaneously adds the apparently insignificant detail of the wet maid who comes from a place linked to Sparta.

On the other hand, the information about Alcibiades physical beauty is included before the comments on his *ethos* – the *ethos* of someone who seems to be imprisoned not only by the changes of fortune but also by his own beauty, which makes him prone to admiration and harassment, although he does not possess the ethical structure to resist the pressure of that harassment. Due to this beauty, boldness, weak and volatile character, and brilliant intelligence, Alcibiades is conditioned right from the beginning to have a turbulent protagonism in the life of Athens.

Plutarch often uses the combination tolma kai synesis to define these acts of boldness which started in his childhood and lasted up to the end of his life. The word used to characterize Alcibiades' behaviour is not andreia, yet this is the term that Plutarch chooses to designate the courage of Coriolanus and which according to him in the corresponding biography means the same as the Romans mean by virtus, translated here by arete in a specific meaning. We can suppose that in the Greek of the author this is his effort to underline the etimological equivalence between andreia and the Latin uirtus, which seems to be combined with temperance and sense of justice (enkrateia kai dikaiosyne) in Coriolanus (Synkrisis, 44). His extreme arrogance and pride make up his negative side and will eventually be his downfall.

The beginning of Coriolanus' biography already prepares the *synkrisis* between the two *Lives*, because, in a way, it exemplifies the parallelism between the childhoods of the two characters. Coriolanus also lost his father in childhood but he held great affection for his mother. Affection, as such, is not mentioned in *Alcibiades*, but attention is instead given to the groups of young people around the protagonist and to those who follow him. Coriolanus lacked the strong presence of a father and an education which would have developed the virtues of his character and intelligence, while containing the flaws and impulses, like rage, which he was prone to, and arrogance. Plutarch uses the beautiful Platonic image to emphasize the important role that education plays on noble and potentially good characters (*Cor.* 1.2.):

⁸ See Plato, Rep. 491, d-e.

On the other hand, the same Marcius bore witness for those who hold that a generous and noble nature, if it lacks discipline, is apt to produce much that is worthless along with its better fruits, like a rich soil deprived of the husband-man's culture.

These comments are a type of response to Alcibiades' journey through his youth. He, unlike Coriolanus, had prestigious tutors, someone who looked after his education and, above all, he could count on the dedication of Socrates who was determined to bring out the best in him.

Alcibiades' initial potential ethos, with the good and bad qualities that demanded an educator to intervene, and his own effort were subjected to contradictory external agents so that the worst in him prevailed, as a response to one of these types of agents.

On the one hand, let us consider the first of the external agents: those who admire Alcibiades' body and physical demonstrations — the adulators, the young men who are driven by the impetus of a physical *eros*, and in which they exacerbate the desire to satisfy immediate pleasure. This stimulus is easily associated with wine and drunkenness, to the lack of moderation in banquets, and to the search for easy glory in public life, even sacrificing coherence, ethical rectitude and the well-being of the city. The episode narrated by Plutarch in 4.5 serves as the opening for a history of insolent and domineering behaviour by Alcibiades shown in his social environment, such as at the banquet, and caused by heavy drinking and the awareness that the people who he humiliates, like Anytus, are fascinated by him⁹:

This man was a lover of his, who, entertaining some friends, asked Alcibiades also to dinner. Alcibiades declined the invitation, but after having drunk deep at home with some friends, went in revel rout to the house of Anytus, took his stand at the door of the men's chamber, and, observing the tables full of gold and silver beakers, ordered the slaves to take half of them and carry them home for him. He did not deign to go in, but played this prank and was off. The guests were naturally indignant, and declared that Alcibiades had treated Anytus with gross and overweening insolence (hybristikos kai hyperephanos).

Alcibiades' intervention in the banquet given by Socrates' antagonist, Anytus, where he arrived tardly to, recalls Plato's *Banquet*, where the theme of *eros* is discussed and where Alcibiades, also arriving late, shows that he is not fit to overcome the eroticism of the sensitive world.

On this subject see M. CEREZO MAGÁN, "Embriaguez y vida disoluta en las Vidas" in: J. G. MONTES CALA, M. SÁNCHEZ ORTIZ DE LANDALUCE & R. GALLÉ CEJUDO (eds.), Plutarco, Dioniso y el vino. Actas del VI simposio español sobre Plutarco: Cádiz 14-16 de Mayo de 1998, Madrid, 1999, pp. 171-180.

Alcibiades' corruption draws out the corruption of his peers. And if the misfortunes of the *tyche* can work as a kind of character test, weakening but also strengthening it, then in the case of Alcibiades the *tyche* factor did not test him as we saw in the text quoted above (4.2.). It was exceptionally favourable to him and so it stopped him from wanting to recognise the limits of the human being and the need for a philosophical introspection and from joining a practical philosophy.

In fact, the references to Socrates' presence are contained in the first phase in this young man's life and are intentionally intertwined with the excesses of the protagonist. The reference to the erotic physical relationship with Anytus, which was a source of arrogance and imbalance to Alcibiades (4.5), is preceded by Alcibiades' reference to Socrates' eros and contrasts with it (4.1). He represents the eros directed at innate qualities and which he aims to help develop the soul of the eroumenos. In this kind of chaotic life, Socrates represents the call of Philosophy, the call of order and the order of the soul, through the askesis of a practical philosophy which develops the love for the Beautiful and for Good in the individual, never separating one from another ethically. But Socrates was an exception, because he possessed the privileged vision of a daimonios who perfected the ability to see beyond the detachment from the material world by maintaining the true Philosophy as a true life-style. It allowed him to see the seminal qualities in Alcibiades' soul which urgently needed developing. This is the second agent fighting to annul the effects of the first that has already been mentioned in this analysis. Nevertheless, the strategic references to the plot and to Socrates' intentions show the inefficiency of his influence upon Alcibiades. In fact, this young man is surrounded by a whirlwind of stimuli which bring out the worst in him and which are reinforced by an apparent exceptionally favourable tyche (4.1):

But it was the love which Socrates had for him that bore strong testimony to the boy's native excellence and good parts (martyrion ...tes aretes kai euphyias). These Socrates saw radiantly manifest in his outward person, and, fearful of the influence upon him of wealth and rank and the throng citizens, foreigners and allies who sought to pre-empt his affections by flattery and favour, he was fain to protect him, and not suffer such a fair plant to cast its native fruit to perdition.

Next there is the reference to the exceptional tyche which made the young man "invulnerable to philosophy". It functions as a type of anticipation of the future, so typical of Aeschylus' tragedy. It is intertwined with the speech about Socrates' influence on him and his own attraction for Socrates, which leads him to listen to the philosopher attentively, like someone who listens to a lover, and to become his regular companion and to despise "rich and famous lovers". Was Alcibiades ever truly touched by Socratic wisdom? The fragile plant possessed qualities for that, but the field in which it grew (anticipating the powerful image in Coriolanus' Life) and all the conditions which were adverse to its growth made Socrates' efforts worthless. Plutarch wants to show this from the beginning through the way he organized

his speech. Later this will be clearer when he refers to this man's *ten tes physeos* anomalian (16.6). In his closeness to Socrates, not even Alcibiades realizes that the benevolent effort of the philosophical genius did not truly have the right conditions to exert his influence (4.3-4):

...he came to think that the work of Socrates was really a kind of provision of the gods for the care and salvation of youth. Thus, by despising himself, admiring his friend, loving that friend's kindly solicitude and revering his excellence, he insensibly acquired an "image of love", as Plato says, "to match love", and all were amazed to see him eating, exercising, and tenting with Socrates, while he was harsh and stubborn with the rest of his lovers...

The episode of the drunkenness and excesses at Anytus' banquet follows immediately.

From that moment on, Plutarch treats the reason behind Socrates' behaviour with skilful expressiveness, so as to convey the idea that the philosopher's influence on Alcibiades is progressively lost on the soul of the young man. It is as if the growth of that shoot with so much potential was suffocated by weeds (6.1):

But the love (*eros*) of Socrates, though it had many powerful rivals (*antagonistas*), somehow mastered Alcibiades. For he was of good natural parts, and the words of his teacher took hold of him and wrung his heart and brought tears to his eyes. But sometimes he would surrender himself to the flatterers who tempted him with many pleasures (*hedonas*), and slip away from Socrates, and suffer himself to be actually hunted down by him like a runaway slave. And yet he feared and reverenced Socrates alone, and despised the rest of his lovers.

According to Plutarch, Alcibiades no longer feels that Socrates can bring out the image of love in him. What he feels is the fear and the reverence from which he wants to escape, while the philosopher tries to fulfil his duty, in vain, on Alcibiades' soul. Alcibiades is about to lose himself in the whirlpool of pleasure. The success of Socrates' influence is now put side by side with that of the adulators, as his rivals, and is no longer constant and imposed through natural seduction. The image of the fugitive slave is very expressive.

Socrates' portrait as an exceptional being who is assisted by the *daimon* (17.4), which only happens in the cases of people who cultivate philosophy to such a high degree and lead their students to it, is in perfect harmony with Socrates' image at the time of Plutarch. The same happens in the way he is treated in other works by Plutarch, all under the influence of Plato's dialogues. His *De genio Socratis*, in particular, is visible in many of the stages of the different *Lives*¹⁰.

Plato and Xenophon played a decisive role, among others, as Aristotle, Demetrius of Phalerum, Panaetius, in the portrait of Socrates in later antiquity and in his popularity. On the specific case

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Following the battle of Potidaea, Socrates' last attempt to cultivate Alcibiades' sense of values represents an extreme attempt to have the merit that truly belonged to the philosopher's passed on to him. On this Plutarch says:

The prize of valour fell to Socrates, of course, on the justest calculation but the generals, owing to the high position of Alcibiades, were manifestly anxious to give him the glory of it. Socrates, therefore, wishing to increase his pupil's honourable ambitions (to philotimon en tois kalois), led all the rest in bearing witness to his bravery...

In other words, the philosopher makes a desperate call to an ethical aspect which is a strong trait in Alcibiades' character – the *philotimia* – in order to lead him to do good and thus lead him to beauty through being good. As a matter of fact *philotimia* seems to present in Plutarch neither positive nor negative connotations. Its positive or negative efficacy derives from other ethical dimensions and from some specific external stimuli¹¹.

All this tension between the forces seems to reflect in the stylistic game of words made up with the root *phil-*: Alcibiades owes Socrates for the important contribution of the philosopher's *philanthropia* (1.2) to his fame (*doxa*), but because the impulse to be *philoneikos* and *philoprotos* (2.1) appeared very early on his life he achieved easy glory and protagonism without virtue. As a result he was impenetrable to the *philosophy* of the master (4.2). Socrates diagnoses in him a *philotimia* that he tries to move towards ethical correctness but does so in vain. Alcibiades' *philotimia* will develop with adulation, with his awareness of his natural gifts, his narcissism and his tendency to excess and oppression, and also with his favourable luck, to the point where well renowned citizens will see it as danger, which could easily be associated with tyranny (16.1-2). Alcibiades causes feelings in the common people as contradictory as his own nature because he is loved, hated and wanted.

Even though he is protected by Alcibiades, Socrates' retreat, when the Greeks leave Delium, almost symbolizes the departure of the philosopher from Alcibiades' life.

Within the context of a Hellas submerged in a deep crisis with many fights and

of Plutarch see J. P. HERSHBELL, "Plutarch's Portrait of Socrates" ICS 13 (1988) 365-382. As HERSHBELL points out (p. 374 sq.) "another popular subject of the Middle Platonic literature was Socrates' daimonion". Socrates was the type of soul that a daimon could guide to 'bridge' the gap between pratical and contemplative life, between the role of the philosopher and that one of the active citizen by means of philosophy and of the pedagogical power of philosophy.

Negative meanings of *philotimia* are to see, for example, in its association to *doxomania* (Plu. *Sull.* 7), *kenodoxia* (M. 57d), *philoneikia* (Ages. 23, 33), *philarchia* (M. 785 sq.). Positive meanings are to see, for example, in its association to *philodoxia* (M. 39e), *doxa* (e. g. Cam. 31). The adjective *philotimos* meaning 'generous' appears in *Crass*. 3 (*philotimos peri xenous*). On the history of the concept and on the originality of Plutarch see F. Frazier, "À propos de la philotimie dans les *Vies*. Quelques jalons dans l'histoire d'une notion" *R Ph* 67 (1988) 109-127.

where luck and power can easily change direction and favour one side or another at war, Alcibiades learns to change sides easily and to persuade his temporary allies or betray them, when needed, making use of his *synesis kai tolme* (21.2, 35.1). He is driven by that same uncontrollable ambition and desire for protagonism. With the same ease, he behaves either honestly or dishonestly, excessively and pompously among the Persians, or moderately and severely among the Spartans, according to his ambition and the profit he can take from the situation. For the common people this volatile and brilliant adaptation to the circumstances will awaken his dream for tyranny (35.1). According to Plutarch, this monstrous disturbance of character, which worsens along with the crisis in the Hellas, can be compared to the behaviour of a crawling animal – the chameleon (23.3).

All in all, this man who was able to divide and destabilize all the Peloponnesus, who annulled the pacifying effort of Nicias, came to represent the crisis itself and made material the very spirit of that time. If the order in the city has some parallel to the order of the soul, then the anomaly of a *physis*, which Socrates was unable to shape, is in accordance with the political landscape of an Athens whose life was at the mercy of the masses driven by tyrannical impetus. Demagogues, unscrupulous leaders and lords of war multiply and take advantage of this environment. So the fragile shoot of virtue dried up and gave way to the increasingly evident moves of the chameleon.

Plutarch imitates the rhythm oscillations of this character and of his fate to finish the comparison between the *Lives* of Alcibiades and Coriolanus in a theatrical way. Firstly, he establishes a comparison between both which seems to be more favourable to Alcibiades than to Coriolanus and then, in the end, he unexpectedly turns things around and concludes that Coriolanus' *philotimia* was redeemed by his *sophrosyne* and detachment from wealth¹². On the other hand, Alcibiades proves to be the most unscrupulous and immoral man, deprived of the sense of *to kalon*.

His death best illustrates his life. He was a victim of the fear that the threat of his tyranny represented and of the contradictory feelings that *doxa* caused in him, as well as the victim of the intrigues he himself created. So, he died, ambiguously, covered in the clothes of a courtesan or he was pure and simply caught while trying to escape after he satisfied his *eros*. And then a day arrived when the chameleon could no longer rely on his ability to adapt and mimic.

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¹² Synkrisis, 44: here Coriolanus' to philotimon appears associated to orge and lype, two negative forces.

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