INTRODUCTION

PLUTARCH AT THE CROSSROADS
OF RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

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Plutarch of Chaeronea, who was born to a wealthy family in 45 CE, received the best education at home and abroad. He frequently traveled to Rome, Alexandria and Athens; while in Athens he probably attended the lectures of Ammonius, who influenced his adoption of Platonism. However, he spent most of his life in his hometown of Chaeronea, where he later founded a sort of philosophical school or academy in which family, friends and pupils could meet and discuss philosophical issues. Due to his social provenance and education, he developed a rich political career and social life in which he was acquainted with most of the prominent political and cultural figures of the period. He is therefore a first-rate witness to the cultural life of late antiquity.

2 K. Ziegler, "Plutarchos", RE, XXI (1951) 636–662 at 653–657 in his overview of Plutarch's travels, he points out (653) that his testimony is essential for our knowledge of the history and topography of ancient Athens.
4 However, Plutarch seems to have left the Academy rather early, which H. Dörrie, "Der Platonismus in der Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte der frühen Kaiserzeit", in Platonica minora (Munich 1976) 166–210 at 183, traces back to Plutarch's fundamental disagreement with some of the main tenets of Platonism, such as his literal reading of the Timaeus which implied his view that the cosmos was created after time, on which C. Froidefrond commented, "Plutarque et le Platonisme", ANRW II 36.1 (1987) 184–243 at 189–197. See further Dörrie, "Die Stellung Plutarchs", 36–56.
1. Plutarch and the Philosophical Discourse

Plutarch’s testimony is essential to reconstructing and understanding the philosophical and religious worlds of late antiquity. Even if he is not always cherished as a philosopher by his readers,\(^7\) Plutarch plays a key role in the history of ancient philosophy, both as an active part of the philosophical discussion taking place in his time and as a more detached observer of other important events. In fact, he is credited as the most important Middle Platonist author,\(^8\) not only for the bulk of his philosophical production—more than half of his recorded works in the Catalogue of Lamprias are devoted to philosophical matters—but also for the extensive influence he exerted on both Middle and Neoplatonic authors. The copious quotes or allusions to his person and work in antiquity bear witness to his central importance in the philosophical map of antiquity: Neopythagoreans, Middle Platonists, Neoplatonists and Christians alike frequently appealed to his authority.\(^9\)

Plutarch’s works are enormously important to the history of ancient philosophy. First, his testimony is essential to understanding the development of Platonism in the first centuries of the era. Indeed, his relationship with the Academy, his version of Platonism, his role in Middle Platonism, his contribution to or his evidence regarding the formation of the typically Middle

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\(^7\) This is valid for both his ancient and modern readers. Thus, for example, Neoplatonists such as Proclus who were scandalized by his view of the origins of the cosmos, mostly viewed Plutarch as an historian, and in this line, Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* describes him as “a litterateur and antiquarian”. See *contra*, F. Brenk, “An Imperial Heritage: The Religious Spirit of Plutarch”, *ANRW* II.36.1 (1987) 248–349; and Froidefond, “Plutarque et le Platonisme”, 233. A middle point may be found in Dürrie, “Der Platonismus”, 184, which distinguishes the ancient from the modern perception of the sense in which Plutarch’s work may be called “philosophical”. While from a modern perspective only the treatises against Epicureans and Stoics are philosophical, from an ancient perspective almost every work of his literary production might be considered philosophical: “Im antiken Sinne is freilich alles philosophisch, was Plutarch aufzeichnete—philosophisch darum, weil aus den zahlreichen einzelnen Beobachtungen, die sich auf Phänomene der Natur und der Literatur beziehen, wieder und wieder Schlüsse auf das hinter ihnen Verborgene gezogen werden, etc”. See in this volume the chapter by G. Roskam, 85–100, esp. 98–99.


\(^9\) R. Hirzel, *Plutarch* (Leipzig 1912) is still the best study on Plutarch’s reception; Ziegler, “Plutarchos”, 947–962; for the influence of his ethical and theological writings on early Christianity, see H.D. Betz (ed.), *Plutarch’s Theological Writings and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden 1975) and idem (ed.), *Plutarch’s Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature* (Leiden 1978).