PLUTARCH'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY:
PERIPATETIC AND PLATONIC

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Introduction: Plutarch's Eclecticism

Plutarch’s admiration for the “divine” Plato, a “philosopher pre-eminent in reputation and influence,”¹ has been a starting point for many studies of his own thought, but K. Ziegler noting that Plutarch considered himself a Platonist, deemed him kein originaler Denker, whose primary allegiance to Plato was in ethics.² For H. Dörrie Plutarch’s philosophy was a form of “school Platonism,” a view rejected by J. Dillon who regarded Plutarch as an “unorthodox” Platonist.³ According to Dillon, Plutarch might even be considered an eclectic thinker, provided that “eclectic” is understood descriptively and not disparagingly.⁴ For example, in Plutarch’s De virtute morali and in some of his other works, Aristotelian or Peripatetic opinions appear, a phenomenon Dillon explained not as “mindless eclecticism,” but as a consequence of Plutarch’s belief that Aristotle essentially remained a Platonist.⁵

This study’s main purpose is, however, not to pursue in extenso Plutarch’s eclecticism or Platonism, but to re-examine his knowledge of Aristotelian and Peripatetic works, especially those concerned with political thought, and to assess their possible influence on Plutarch’s own political philosophy. Scholars such as J. Dillon, F.H. Sandbach, G. Verbeke, K. Ziegler, and especially G.J.D. Aalders, H. Wzn. and L. de

¹ See De capienda ex inimicis utilitate 90C where Plato is called “divine”, an epithet of greatest praise, and Quaestiones convivales 700B for the second reference.
² Ziegler (1964) col. 301. This second edition of Ziegler’s comprehensive treatment of Plutarch and his work, is a photomechanical reproduction of his 1949 offprint appearing in R.E. two years later in expanded and revised form. See vol. 21.1, cols. 636–962. Col. 938 in R.E. = col. 301.
⁴ See Dillon (1988) 104 and passim.
⁵ Ibidem 112.
Blois,\(^6\) have all contributed much to understanding Aristotelian/Peripatetic influence on Plutarch. To these and other scholars much indebtedness is owed.

Plutarch’s Knowledge of Aristotle’s Political Works

Plutarch belongs to the best educated and well-read of ancient Greek authors, and given his many works, both extant and lost, it is clear that Plutarch drew from numerous sources for his Lives and Moralia. Most of these sources were literary, but Plutarch also had a large circle of friends, composed of intellectuals and well-educated statesmen.\(^7\) It is thus likely that he used oral as well as literary sources. Plutarch had a prodigious memory, and he also kept “notebooks” (ὑπομνήματα), most likely excerpts from or comments on his reading and his conversation with others.\(^8\)

Given these considerations, a brief survey of relevant studies since Ziegler’s excellent “Plutarchos von Chaironeia” in Paulys Realencyclopaedie (1949),\(^9\) is in order concerning Aristotelian and Peripatetic influence on Plutarch. In “Plutarch and the Development of Aristotle” (1960), G. Verbeke never doubted Plutarch’s knowledge of the Corpus Aristotelicus, accepting Ziegler’s belief that Plutarch knew Aristotle’s Politics and other works.\(^10\) In 1982, stimulated by I. Düring’s “Notes on the History of Transmission of Aristotle’s Writings” (1950), F.H. Sandbach thoroughly studied Plutarch’s knowledge of Aristotle while criticizing H.C. Helmbold and E. O’Neil, Plutarch’s Quotations (1959).\(^11\) They provided, for example, no clear criteria for determining a quotation, and Sandbach properly questioned their “parallels” vis-a-vis Aristotle, asking whether any of these or their “quotations” really demonstrate Plutarch’s direct knowledge of the Corpus Aristotelicum.\(^12\)

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\(^8\) See Mor. 464F. For more on ὑπομνήματα, see “Hypomnema” in Der kleine Pauly, eds. K. Ziegler & W. Sontheimer II (Munich, 1979), cols. 1282–1283.

\(^9\) See note 2 preceding.


\(^12\) Sandbach (1982) 209. See also Samuel Sandmel’s “Parallelomania,” Journal of Biblical Literature 81 (1962), 1–13 which cautions against the dangers of finding “parallels.”