Synopsis

The articles comprising this chapter provide insights into Plutarch’s political thinking. The moral approaches are again obvious in both Lives and Moralia, but we should also bear in mind that in the area of politics Plutarch was likely to pass judgements deriving not only from his sources, but, to some extent, from his own personal experience as a local magistrate.

Lukas de Blois will portray and discuss in his paper Plutarch’s ideal statesman; a statesman who is described by a series of traditional commonplaces and is chiefly embodied by Solon and Lycurgus, whose Lives particularly abound in commonplaces, characteristic anecdotes and edifying stories, because nothing much was known about the historical Solon and Lycurgus. The author maintains that the above biographies are decisively influenced by the following three complexes of commonplaces and stereotypes: the good statesman, the interaction between leaders and démos, and the right mental preparation of the masses which should precede sound political reform.

In Plutarch’s Lives and political treatises a good statesman is someone who makes his entry into public life out of the right philosophical choice and with a good education in order to serve the public interest. He is a virtuous person also in his private life, and inter alia knows how to sensibly delegate tasks and how to treat colleagues and friends without being corrupt. A good statesman inspires the people with his aretē and cultivates homonoia in the community. Further, the good statesman is a dignified speaker and not a demagogue. He always has to guide fickle mobs, and in view of political reforms he must first persuade his people for their indispensability and the right course of action. Lycurgus did manage to persuade the Spartans and change their mentality, and so his reforms endured. Solon, though an adroit politician and lawgiver, gave in to circumstances and so gained only some temporary success. In Plutarch’s Solon and Lycurgus we see anachronistic image-building, based on criteria and ideas that Plutarch also mentioned in his Moralia political treatises.

Geert Roskam focuses on the two roads which, according to Plutarch’s Political precepts, the statesman may take in order to enter political life: the quick one that immediately leads to fame, and the slower one that is safer. Plutarch speaks of the two roads as real alternatives, since either has its own advantages and disadvantages. Yet whichever path the politician chooses, he will have to take into account important limitations. Many of the examples presented to Menemachus in the Praecepta return in the Lives, where they are
often discussed in much more detail. Furthermore, the *Lives* offer much additional material, which sometimes leads to a more nuanced picture. A comparison of this material with Plutarch’s more theoretical evaluation of both roads in the *Political precepts* can throw further light upon the precise meaning and scope of this aspect of his political advice. At the same time, Plutarch’s reflections in the *Praecepta* can contribute to an insight into some aspects of his moral evaluation of the heroes in the *Lives*.

**Sven-Tage Teodorsson**, concerning himself with the education of rulers in theory (*Moralia*) and in practice (*Lives*), contends that there is a discrepancy between what Plutarch recommends in his political treatises and what he fails to comment in many of his biographies. In the *Moralia*, for instance, he frequently underlines the importance and usefulness of philosophical training for rulers. In *Max. cum princ.* he admonishes philosophers to teach politicians in the first place; in *Ad princ. inerud.* he reproaches generals and rulers for ignorance, conceit and lack of moral virtue; and in *Praec. ger. reip.* he declares that any young man who is entering a public career should acquire some philosophical armament. In view of the above, we would expect Plutarch to inform us somewhat systematically about the philosophical education of the politicians and generals presented in his *Vitae*, but this is hardly the case. It seems, then, that in reality theory and practice did not agree, and it is the factual reality that makes Plutarch often tone down the educational strain in the *Lives*.

On the other hand, **John Dillon** is concerned with two philosophically educated rulers, Dion and Brutus, one of his most interesting biographical pairs. Were these men ideal rulers or, at least, any efficient and successful? In his little essay *To an Uneducated Ruler*, Plutarch actually presents us with a very useful sketch of his vision of the ideal ruler, from a Platonist perspective. For Plutarch, the salient characteristic of the good ruler is that he allows himself to be ruled in turn by divine reason. This reason is expressed in Law, but, in the case of the ruler, the laws are internalised by, and personified in, him. Such an emperor as Trajan, for instance, would have qualified well enough, one feels, in Plutarch’s view as an example of such a ruler – as no doubt would Hadrian, if Plutarch had lived long enough to appreciate him.

But Plutarch did also recognize the problem of the alienation of the good ruler from his environment, as is the case of Dion and Brutus, two philosopher kings adrift in a hostile world. Both were well-educated, both were by conviction Platonists, and both chose to involve themselves in public life to their own ultimate detriment. To illustrate their portrayal as philosopher–kings
manqués, Dillon selects a number of salient passages from each *Life*, and
discusses them in turn.*

As we saw in De Blois’s article above, for a statesman to be successful, the
goodwill of the people is a *sine qua non*. In this article Evangelos Alexiou,
after observing that the pursuit of *eunoia* was a key point of political
consideration already in the 4th century BC., and that Isocrates might have
influenced Plutarch’s political thinking, enlarges on the prerequisite of *eunoia*.
Based on the entirely classical basis of practical ethics of Isocrates, he attempts
to show how Plutarch, another man with a practical turn of mind, deals with
the idea of *eunoia* in theory in the *Praecepta Gerendae Reipublicae* and in practice
in the *Parallel Lives*. **

In the *Praecepta* Plutarch lays emphasis on the fact that being in politics does
not only presuppose proper intention and exercising what is right and useful,
but also the pursuit of the real honour that is closely related with the real *eunoia*
of the fellow-citizens. But *eunoia* is not only an aim but also a means for the
accomplishment of other good purposes. Given that the concept of *eunoia*
plays a secondary role in Plato, we may say that in the *Praecepta* Plutarch
combines Platonic and Isocratean ideas, which are interpreted as an expression
of the political importance of philanthropy and moderation. In the final
analysis, political virtue is *eunoia*. However, that theoretical model of *eunoia* is
not free from conflicts and difficulties, as Isocrates had already shown with the
dramatic example of his student Timotheus. The general Timotheus was
*megalophron*, did his city a lot of good, but was unable to gain the people’s
favour. Similar problems arise also in the *Parallel Lives*, where the exhortations
of the *Praecepta* are put into practice. Here *eunoia* is versatile and more
problematic than in the *Moralia*. Plutarch does recognize its importance in
both political and military life, and also notices its psychological dimension.
But without changing his theoretical approach, the viewpoint is now shifted
from a “protreptic” ethics to the “descriptive” observation of the contribution
of *eunoia* to political and military success. The greatest problem is always the
one-dimensional characters (the military, the aristocrats, the philosophically
educated rulers), who are unable to combine virtue with human contact, or
lack political virtues, such as *praotes*. Coriolanus, Lucullus, Dion constitute
characteristic examples. In all these cases, Plutarch does not criticize the
behaviour of the crowd, but the role of the leading personality, since winning
the goodwill of the people is imperative for those who wish to rule. If in the
*Praecepta* the special weight is laid on the combination of virtue and *eunoia*, in

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* For a successful philosopher-king cf. Castelnérac’s article in ch. 5.
** For a similar interplay between theory and practice cf. also Teodorsson’s article in this chapter.
the *Parallel Lives* the centre of the stage is taken by the indispensability of *eunoia* as far as success in political life is concerned.

**Manuel Tröster** exemplifies the devastating consequences of lack of *eunoia*, as expounded in the previous article, with the case of Lucullus. In Plutarch’s writings, he notes, the *plêthos* is virtually omnipresent as a political force in need of prudent leadership. Thus, in the *Lucullus* the protagonist is constantly forced to assert himself against opposition from various kinds of crowds. In particular, Lucullus faces resistance from his unruly soldiers, who keep complaining about their material situation and the conditions of their service. Both in the field and at home, moreover, he is repeatedly opposed by demagogues intent on frustrating his ambitions by arraying the *plêthos* against him. As Lucullus fails to win the favour of the multitude, the biographer censures him severely, while interpreting his political rôle within the framework of a schematic divide between Senate and people. Building on this picture, Plutarch presents Lucullus as a ‘conservative’ optimate who essentially lacks the ability to appeal to the people at large. However, his actual political record shows that he operated with a remarkable degree of flexibility and independence in matters of both domestic and foreign policy. Given the significance of public proceedings in Roman politics, it is not surprising to see Lucullus regularly communicating with crowds in order to muster support for his personal objectives. Nevertheless, this aspect is largely marginalized in Plutarch’s account, both as a result of the misleading tradition about Lucullus’ supposed distance from political affairs and in consequence of the biographer’s desire to focus on the exigencies of dealing with the *plêthos*.

Finally, **Elias Koulakiotis**, using as starting-point Plutarch’s statement that the Roman Numa was in some aspects a *hellenikoteros nomothetes* than the Spartan Lycurgus (*Comp. Lyk.–Nu.* 1.10), attempts to establish the characteristics of a Hellenic lawgiver through a detailed comparison between the biographical Lycurgus (*Lives*) and the rhetorical Alexander (*De Alex. fort.*). He particularly discusses the ways in which these men are presented to legislate, the means they employ to make the people accept their measures, but also the significance of their laws. It is argued that in depicting different lawgivers Plutarch was influenced by the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, but not only by them. The image of the lawgiver who stands in the *meson* and transforms, with the *politeia* he introduces, the city or the world into a *cosmos* is an image that could go back to Herodotus, although it is still valid in Plutarch’s time and is reinterpreted through the Roman experience. The author also maintains that the Greek elite of the time appealed to the influential examples of Lycurgus and Alexander to legitimize its claim to more substantial participation in the Roman administration.