The Ideal Statesman: 
A Commonplace in Plutarch’s Political Treatises, 
His Solon, and His Lycurgus

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The issue I would like to discuss in this paper is whether three important Plutarchan standard topics, i.e. the good statesman, the interaction between leader and demos, and the right mental preparation of the people in times of reform, occur in a similar way both in Plutarch’s political treatises and in two biographies which gave the author sufficient latitude to include favourite commonplaces and standard views.

In Plutarch’s biographies and political treatises descriptions of actions, reforms, events and developments are inextricably intertwined with commonplaces and are frequently described in a language and conceptual framework that contemporary audiences could understand, and apply to their own situations. Many stereotypes, commonplaces and models, which Plutarch applies in his political treatises, recur in his Solon and Lycurgus. These Lives gave Plutarch ample opportunity to insert loci communes, stereotypes, characteristic anecdotes and edifying stories, because nothing much was known about the historical Solon and Lycurgus. As a matter of fact, Solon may have been a more tangible figure than the Spartan reformer Lycurgus, if only because Solonian poetry was still extant and Athens wrote down more of its collective memory than Sparta did. In the opening lines of his Lycurgus Plutarch considers the Spartan reformer an enigmatic figure, concerning whom nothing could be said which was not disputed (Lyc. 1.1). Lycurgus may even have been not an historical person, but a local demi-god who had been transformed into a law-giver. 

1 I.e. Max. c. princ. 776B – 779C; Ad princ. 779D – 782F; An seni 783B – 797F, and above all Praec. 798A – 825F).

2 Translations into English of passages from Plutarch’s Lycurgus and Solon were borrowed from B. Perrin (Loeb, vol. I). Translations into English of passages from Plutarch’s Moralia were borrowed from H. North Fowler (Loeb, vol. X). On Lycurgus see Hdt. 1.65; Plato, Resp. 8, 544c–551b; Xen., Lac. Pol. 5–13; Aristotle, Pol. 2.6.2–13, 1269a34–1270a40; Plut., Lyc. 5–29. A Lycurgus may have had a cult in Laconia; see Plut., Lyc. 31.3. On Lycurgus see Tigerstedt, 222; Huxley, 41 ff.; Oliva, 63–70; Manfredini-Piccirilli, xii–xxvi, esp. xii–xv; Starr, 26 and 41.
The first commonplace that I would like to discuss is Plutarch’s standard image of the right attitude and qualities of a ruler, politician or statesman. In Plutarch’s political treatises a good ruler or politician is a wise, educated man, who listens to good philosophically trained advisers, has a network of trustworthy friends, and maintains a good philosophical *prohairesis* as an in-built law and a guarantee of good, reliable and steadfast public and private behaviour. He should persuade his people rather than use force. In *Ad principem ineruditum*, *Maxime cum principibus philosopho esse disserendum* and *Praecepta rei publicae gerendum* Plutarch brings forward that philosophy, as a law implanted in the ruler by a good education, neutralizes the moral risks involved in the exercise of power. A philosophically based form of reason should, as an inner law, rule the ruler and keep him on a steadfast good course, not a written law made by men (*Ad. Princ.* 780CD). In the same passage, a few lines earlier, in 780B, Plutarch gives us a sharp description of the opposite, saying:

Uneducated generals and rulers are often rocked and capsized by the ignorance within them; for since the foundation upon which they have built up their lofty power is not laid straight, they lean with it and lose their balance (*Ad. Princ.* 780B).

A good ruler or politician associates with wise men and good philosophical advisers, and listens to them. In Plutarch’s view philosophers have an important task in this respect. In *Max. c. princ.* 778EF he says:

So the philosophers who associate with persons in private station make those individuals inoffensive, harmless, and gentle towards themselves, but he who removes evil from the character of a ruler, or directs his mind towards what is right, philosophizes, as it were, in the public interest and corrects the general power by which all are governed.

Good friends are important as well. In his *Praecepta rei publicae gerendae* Plutarch tells us quite a lot about it. A good statesman may grant his friends opportunities and advantages without being corrupt, but he has to realize that the state is higher than a personal network and that the law is superior to friendship.

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3  See *Max.c.princ.* 776B–E and 779B; *Ad princ.* 779F and 780CD; *Pracc.* 798C. See De Blois 1992, 4569 and 4600 f.
4  *Ad princ.* 780B: οἱ δ’ ἀπαίδευτοι στρατηγοὶ καὶ ἡγεμόνες ὑπὸ τῆς ἐντὸς ἀγνομοσύνης πολλάκις σαλέουσιν καὶ περιτρέπονται: βάσει γὰρ οὐ κειμένη πρὸς δρᾶσις ἔξουσιαν ἐποικισμοῦντες ψυχῆν συναπτονέουσαν.
5  *Max. c. princ.* 778EF: οὕτως οἱ μὲν (= the philosophers) ἰδιώταις συνόντες οὕτως ἐκεῖνος ποιοῦσιν ἑαυτοῖς ἀλλού σκεφτέσθαι καὶ ἀθλήτῃς καὶ προσηνείς, ὑπὸ δ’ ἀρχοντος ἢ ἰδιος ἀφαιρῶν μοχρηνον ἢ γνώμην ἐρ’ ὑπὸ δὲ συγκατευθύνων πρότεσθαι τινᾶ δημοσίας φιλοσοφεῖ καὶ τὸ κοινὸ ἐπανορθοῦνται, ὑ δέ τόπος διοικοῦνται.
6  *Pracc.* 806F–809B; 816A–817C; 819B–D; 823A–E.
violence; he convinces the citizens by his words and by his exemplary lifestyle.\(^\text{7}\)

In his \textit{Lycurgus} and \textit{Solon} Plutarch brings forward similar notions. Plutarch’s paradigm of a good leader and statesman was not Plato or his pupil Dion of Syracuse, or another philosophically minded politician, but the legendary Spartan reformer Lycurgus. In his \textit{Life of Lycurgus} 31.1 f., Plutarch says that Lycurgus’ design for a civil polity was adopted by Plato, Diogenes, Zeno and by all those who won approval for their treatises on this subject, although they left behind them only writings and words, and that Lycurgus, on the other hand, produced not writings and words, but an actual polity, which was beyond imitation.\(^\text{8}\)

Lycurgus assembled a sufficient number of good, reliable friends who could help him to put his reforms into effect (Plut., \textit{Lycurgus} 5.4–5; Sol. 16.1). He educated himself by visiting wise men and listening to them. In \textit{Lycurgus} 4.1–2 Plutarch tells us that the Spartan statesman before starting his reforms went to Crete, where he studied the various forms of government and made the acquaintance of some distinguished men. He invited one of them, the lyric poet and musician Thaletas, to come to Sparta and soften and improve the mentality of the Spartan citizens by his measured rhythms (\textit{Lycurgus} 4.1–2). In this way he was successful in preparing sound political reform by changing the mood of the Spartan demos. According to Plut., \textit{Lycurgus} 8.1–2, Lycurgus persuaded (Greek: \textit{sunepeise}) his fellow citizens to accept a redistribution of land, although he did not refrain from political tricks and even violence if the

\(^{7}\) Cf. \textit{Præc.} 801C; 802 E; 823A.

\(^{8}\) Plutarch, \textit{Lycurgus} 31.1–2: Οὐ μὴν τούτο γε τῷ Λυκούργῳ κεφάλαιον ἢν τότε, πλείστων ἡγουμένην ἄπολιτείν τὴν πόλιν· ἀλλ’ ἄσπερ ἐνός ἀνδρὸς βίω καὶ πόλεως όλης νομίζων εὐθαυμοῦν ἀπ’ ἄρετῆς ἐγγίνεσθαι καὶ ὑμνοῖς τῆς πρὸς ὀυτὴν, πρὸς τούτο συνέτοξε καὶ συνήμροσεν, ὅπως ἐλευθερίω καὶ αὐτάρκεις γενόμεναι καὶ σωφρονόντες ἐπὶ πλείστων χρόνων διαστελὼς, ταύτην καὶ Πλάτων ἱλαβε τῆς πολιτείας ὑπόδειξαι καὶ Διογένης καὶ Ζήνων καὶ πάντων δήσοι τι περὶ τούτων ἐπιχειρήσαντες εἰπένν ἐπαινοῦντα, γράμματα καὶ λόγους, ἀλλὰ ἐργῶν πολιτείαν ἄμιμην εἰς φῶς προενεγκάμενος, καὶ τοῖς ἀνάπτακτοι εἶν τὴν πόλιν Φιλασοφοῦσαν, εἰκότως ὑπερῆ πῇ δόξῃ τοὺς πώςοτε πολιτευσαμένους ἐν τοῖς Ἑλλησί (It was not the chief design of Lycurgus then to leave his city in command over a great many others, but he thought that the happiness of an entire city, like that of a single individual, depended on the prevalence of virtue and concord within its own borders. The aim, therefore, of all his arrangements and adjustments was to make his people free-minded, self-sufficing, and moderate in all their ways, and to keep them so as long as possible. His design for a civil polity was adopted by Plato, Diogenes, Zeno and by all those who have won approval for their treatises on this subject, although they left behind them only writings and words. Lycurgus, on the other hand, produced not writings and words, but an actual polity, which was beyond imitation, and because he gave … an example of an entire city given to the love of wisdom, his fame rightly transcended that of all who ever founded polities among the Greeks).
necessity arose (Lyc. 11; Sol. 16.1). In Plutarch’s opinion Lycurgus was a more successful politician and statesman than Solon was. The latter could not persuade all his fellow citizens, rich and poor, to accept his *seisachtheia,* nor could he change the incurably materialistic and quarrelsome mentality of the Athenians. Just like Lycurgus, Solon had *philoi* and friendly helpers, but quite a few of his friends profited by his *seisachtheia* and lined their pockets in a very irregular manner (Sol. 15). Plutarch ascribes to Solon a good *paideia* and a kind of philosophical *prohairesis.* Like Herodotus (1.29 ff.) Plutarch accentuates Solon’s role as one of the wise men of his times. In Sol. 3.4 Plutarch remarks that in philosophy Solon cultivated chiefly the domain of political ethics, like most of the wise men of the time. However, Plutarch had some misgivings. In a recently published article Christopher Pelling convincingly argues that in Plutarch’s biography Solon is a wise man, and one who never ceased to learn as he grew old (Sol. 2.2; 31.7) and that there is an emphasis on wisdom in Plutarch’s *Solon.* He points out that many other wise figures crop up in this

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9 In Sol. 16.1–2 the author says: ‘Ἡρετεία ὑπηκούσα, ἀλλ’ ἐλύπησε καὶ τοὺς πλουσίους ἄνελθον τὰ συμβάλλαι, καὶ μᾶλλον ἐπὶ τοὺς πένθας, ὅτι γῆς ἀναδασμὸν οὐκ ἐποίησεν ἐλπίσασιν αὐτοῖς, οὔθε παντατίπασιν, ὥσπερ ὁ Λυκαύργος, ὁμολογὸς τοῖς βίοις καὶ ἱσοῦς κατέστησεν. Ἀλλ’ ἐκείνος μὲν ἐνδέκατος ὄν ἢρακλείους καὶ βεβασιευκός ἦτο πολλὰ τῆς Λακεδαίμονος, ἀξίωμα μέγα καὶ φίλοις καὶ δύναμιν οὐς ἔγνω καλῶς περὶ τῆς πολιτείας ὑπηρετοῦσαν ἐξε, καὶ βία μᾶλλον ἢ πεισθεὶς χρησάμενος, ὡστε καὶ τὸν ὀφθαλμὸν ἐκκοπῆσαι, κατεργάσατο τὸ μέγιστον εἰς σωτηρίαν πόλεως καὶ ὁμόνοια, μιθέαν πέντα μηδὲ πλουσίουν εἶναι τῶν πολιτῶν. Ζῶλων δὲ τούτου μὲν οὐκ ἐφίκετο τῇ πολιτείᾳ δημοτικός ὃν καὶ μέσος, ἐνδέστερον δὲ τῆς ὑπαρχόντως δυνάμεως οὐδὲν ἐπράξεν, ὁμώμενος ἐκ μόνου τοῦ βουλευόμενος καὶ πιστεύειν αὐτῷ τοὺς πολίτας. Ὅτι δ’ οὖν προσέκρουσε τοῖς πλείστοις ἐτέρα προσδοκήσασιν, αὐτῶς ἔρημη περὶ αὐτῶν, ὡς “Χαῦνα μὲν τὸτ’ ἐφράσατο, νῦν δὲ μοι χρολυμένου λαβοῦν ὀφθαλμοὶ ὁρώσι πάντες ὡστε δήλον.” Καίτοι φησίν ὡς, εἰ τὰς ἄλλας ἔχασε τὴν αὐτὴν δύναμιν, “Οὐκ ἂν κατέσχῃ δῆμον, οὔθ’ ἐπαύσατο, πρὶν ἀνταράχας, πιάρ ἐξεῖλεν γάλα (He [= Solon] pleased neither party, however; the rich were vexed because he took away their securities for debt, and the poor still more, because he did not redistribute the land, as they had expected, nor make all men equal and alike in their way of living, as Lycurgus did. But Lycurgus was eleventh in descent from Heracles, and had been king in Lacedaemon for many years. He therefore had great authority, many friends, and power to support his reforms in the commonwealth. He also employed force rather than persuasion, insomuch that he actually lost his eye thereby, and most effectually guaranteed the safety and unanimity of the city by making all its citizens neither poor nor rich. Solon, on the contrary, could not secure this feature in his commonwealth, since he was a man of the people and of modest station; yet he in no wise acted short of his real power, relying as he did only on the wishes of the citizens and their confidence in him. Nevertheless he gave offence to the greater part of them, who expected different results, as he himself says of them in the lines: “Then they had extravagant thoughts of me, but now, incensed, / all look askance at me, as if I were their foe.” And yet had any other man, he says, acquired the same power, “He had not held the people down, nor made an end/ until he had confounded all, and skimmed the cream”).
Life, men such as Thales, Periander, Lycurgus, Pittacus, and more, but that there is very little on where Solon got his wisdom from. As a matter of fact, Plutarch had some doubts about Solon’s early years. He pays some attention to Solon’s trading experience, which was – in his view – not the best education available. It gave the Athenian statesman a flavour of upstart un-philosophical lifestyle (Plut., Sol. 2–3).

The conclusion must here be that Plutarch – speaking about the required qualities of a good statesman – in his Solon and his Lycurgus uses standard topics, which also occur in his political treatises.

This conclusion holds good as well in two other cases, in Plutarch’s view of the interaction of leader and demos and in the way he speaks about political preparation. The interaction between the demos and its leaders was one of Plutarch’s main standard topics, in his Lives as well as his political treatises. In Plutarch’s political treatises a good leader of the people is a dignified speaker and not a demagogue who stirs up the masses (Præc. 801C–804C; 819EF). He grants the people some amusement without spoiling it with common games and distributions as demagogues and mob flatterers do (An seni 788C; 794C; 796EF; Præc. 819F–822A). A good statesman always has to persuade, calm down and guide fickle mobs, the demos of classical Athens being one of the most dangerous ones, as is shown by the various examples that Plutarch gives us in his political treatises.

In a similar way in his biographies of Athenian statesmen the demos is a main actor and the interaction between leaders and people is a crucial theme. The demos follows Themistocles, to the detriment of Aristides, a much wiser and better man. The Athenian citizenry scares Pericles, although he was – like Demosthenes – one of the very few leaders who knew how to guide the Athenian citizens. The Athenian ekklesia loves and applauds Alcibiades, in spite of all his irresponsible behaviour, but sends him into exile with equal frivolity. In Plutarch’s Lives of Athenian statesmen the Athenian citizenry has a wrong mental orientation, towards

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10 Pelling 2004, 98.

11 In Sol. 3.1 Plutarch says: Τὸ δ’ οὖν εὐθάνατον τῷ Σάλωνι καὶ ύγρὸν πρὸς τὴν δίαυσθαι, καὶ τὸ φαρτικότερον ἡ φιλοσοφώτερον ἐν τῷ ποιήμα τις δηλάγεσθαι περὶ τῶν ἡδονῶν, τὸν ἐμπορικὸν οὖν ἵνα προστετήρισθαι σωφρόνιστα καὶ μεγάλους ἀντιστασίας πάλιν ἐπιθέσεις τινὰς καὶ ἀπολύσεις (Accordingly, if Solon’s way of living was expensive and profuse, and if, in his poems, he speaks of pleasure with more freedom than becomes a philosopher, this is thought to be due to his mercantile life; he encountered many and great dangers and sought reward therefore in sundry luxuries and enjoyments).


13 Præc. 799C, 800B–D and 801D–804B.

14 See Plut., Them. 5.4–5; Arist. 2–4, 7.1–2.; Per. 7.1–6, 9.2–4, 10.3, 11.3–5, 15.1–5; Alcib. 17–22, 32–36.
power and material gain, and is a rather fickle mob. In Plutarch’s Dion and in his Roman Lives the Syracusan crowd and the Roman plebs are not doing better. Dion could not change the materialistic and violent temper of the Syracusans, and after king Numa the Roman people forever turned to war and greed.\(^\text{15}\) In Plutarch’s Lives a good political preparation, which has to precede sound reforms, includes a change for the better of the mental attitude of the crowd, be it either the Athenian demos, the Spartan citizenry, the citizens of Syracuse, or the Roman plebs. If a statesman is not successful in turning the mood of the crowd towards reconciliation and a better life, and away from violence and greed, a thoroughgoing, philosophically oriented reform will not be possible and philosophical leaders such as Dion in Syracuse and Brutus or Cato Minor in Rome will tragically fail and go under.\(^\text{16}\) Wrongly oriented demoi can only be guided and held in check by opportunistic, adroit, powerful leaders such as Pericles, Timoleon and Julius Caesar, who combine practical astuteness and persuasive eloquence with a high inherited status, a strong position in society, and a readiness to apply political tricks and even violence if needs be.\(^\text{17}\)

In Plutarch’s Lycurgus the Spartan reformer of the same name is a wise, good leader who knows how to convince his people and change its mental orientation. He invites Thaletas of Crete to come to Sparta and change the mental attitude of the Spartan citizens by means of his fine music, in which this wise man is successful. However, Plutarch also depicts Lycurgus as an adroit politician who overawes opponents by status and power and does not even refrain from violence (Lyc. 11). Lycurgus created a durable good state in Sparta, which was accepted by his citizens, and so did better than Solon in Athens, who was not able to reconcile quarrelling parties and could not persuade all Athenians, rich and poor, to accept his seisachtheia. Unlike the Spartan demos, the Athenian citizenry did not change its mental attitude. After the Cylonian affair, which had polluted Athens, the Athenians invited Epimenides from Crete, who was reputed to be a man a man beloved of the gods and endowed with a mystical and heaven-sent wisdom in religious matters. After having arrived he became Solon’s friend, cleansed the city and made the Athenians more decorous and careful in their religious services and


\(^\text{17}\) On Timoleon see De Blois 1978, 132–143; idem 1997, 219–223; idem 2000, 131–139; cf. Teodorsson, 215–226. On Caesar see Pelling 2002, 55, 63 n. 57, and 104. On Pericles see Plut., Nic. 3.1, where Plutarch remarks that Pericles led Athens by virtue of his native excellence (ἀρετῆς ἀληθινῆς) and powerful eloquence, and had no need to assume any persuasive mannerisms with the multitude. See also Praec. 802C–E. On the importance of eloquence as a means to guide a demos see Van Raalte, 103–112.
more easily inclined to unanimity. Epimenides was vastly admired by the Athenians, who offered him much money and large honours, but he only accepted some modest gifts and returned home, after which the Athenians relapsed into their old disputes about the form of government (Plut., Sol. 12–13). In the end the demos became prone to tyranny. Solon was too astute to become tyrant himself, but he could not stop Peisistratus’ rise to sole rule.

In his political treatises Plutarch likewise speaks about the importance of political preparation and of change for the better of the mental attitude of the crowd, which he classes as an extremely difficult task. In Max. c. princ. 777F he observes that it is neither pleasant nor easy to benefit people if they are unwilling, and in Praec. 800B Plutarch explains how difficult it is to change the multitude. There is indeed some unity in Plutarch’s work in this respect. In both his Lives and his political treatises the author emphasizes the interaction between leaders and demos and the importance of a political preparation, which should precede sound political reforms.

If indeed Plutarchan standard political themes occur both in the political treatises and the biographies, does this lend an anachronistic flavour to the latter? Such topics and commonplaces may reflect contemporary second century AD concepts, like the quintessential importance of status and wealth, Second Sophistic Greek paideia, powerful friends in high imperial places, and eloquence as the only means to hold unruly city crowds in check. It is true, Plutarch accentuates status, for example the strong social position of Lycurgus, and he emphasizes the importance of political friendship, oratory and education in all of his work. However, the examples that he chooses to explain what he is telling us invariably come from classical Greek history and republican Rome, which prevents a too strong creeping in of contemporary anachronistic notions. In the handful of passages where Plutarch speaks about politics in his own times, he classes it as inferior to political activity in the old days. In An seni 794A, and Praec. 811BC and 813 E the author realizes that his contemporaries, like himself local notables living in a province of the Roman Empire, could not reform politeiai or win glorious battles, but rather had to supervise the cleaning of streets and sewers, send embassies to their overlords, and calm down hungry or unruly local mobs, if only to forestall Roman intervention.

Bibliography


18 See Plut., Sol. 16.1–2
19 On the toils and burdens of local public life see An seni 783DE, and 787B.
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