I

To be a philosopher king without a kingdom is indeed a sorry fate. As Plato puts it in Book VI of the Republic (496CD), when describing the problems facing the enlightened philosopher in contemporary (Athenian democratic) society:

“And those who have been of this little company (sc. of true philosophers) and have tasted the sweetness and blessedness of this possession and who have also come to understand the madness of the multitude sufficiently and have seen that there is pretty well nothing sound or right in any present political activity, and that there is no ally with whose aid the champion of justice could escape destruction, but that he would be as a man who has fallen among wild beasts, unwilling to share their misdeeds and unable to hold out singly against the savagery of all, and that he would thus, before he could in any way benefit his friends or the state, come to an untimely end without doing any good to himself or others – for all these reasons, I say, the philosopher remains quiet, minds his own business, and, as it were, standing aside under the shelter of a wall in a storm and blast of dust and sleet, and seeing others filled full of lawlessness, is content if in any way he may keep himself free from iniquity and unholy deeds through this life and take his departure with fair hope, serene and well content when the end comes.” (trans. Paul Shorey, with minor alterations).

This is a pretty comprehensive assault on the nature of public life in contemporary Athens, and constitutes a justification for Plato’s own abdication from active politics; but it also became something of a key text for later authors who had occasion to reflect on the difficulties and dangers to be faced by the man of philosophic virtue in the arena of active politics.

Plutarch knows the passage well enough¹ – how could he not? – but he does not choose to dwell on it in his moral essays, as his own relations with the civil power were far more satisfactory than those of Plato with the Athenian democracy. His concern is no longer with how philosophers shall become

¹ This is only indicated, however, by his employment on a number of occasions (Mor. 97F; 126C; 751E), though for purely literary purposes, of variations on the turn of phrase ἐν χειμῶνι κονιόρτῳ καὶ ξόλης, ‘in a storm-blast of dust and sleet’ (496d7).
kings, or kings philosophers, but rather merely with how the philosopher shall 
properly consort with the kings and consuls of his day, without any thought of 
supplanting them.\footnote{In such works as That a Philosopher Ought to Converse 
Especially with Men of Power; To an Uneducated Ruler; Whether an Old Man 
Should Engage in Public Affairs; and Principles of Statecraft.} I think it is fair to say, as I have suggested in an earlier essay (1997), that Plutarch had come to the conclusion that the world-order constituted by the Roman Empire represented a sort of culmination of the historical strivings of the human race on the political front, even as contemporary Greek *paideia* (based as it was on the achievements of the Greek classical age) was its culmination on the cultural front, and that all that was required from the philosopher in his era was a certain amount of discreet nudging of individual political figures whose performance was not quite up to the mark in one respect or another.

It was not so, however, in past eras, the period covered by his *Lives*. Here, the course of history throws up all too many examples of noble individuals, either of naturally philosophic nature or directly inspired by philosophy, who are ill-matched with their environments. I would like to focus on this occasion on just two of these, Dion of Syracuse and the Roman M. Junius Brutus, whom Plutarch links together in what he tells us (*Dion* 2. 4) is his twelfth book of *Parallel Lives*. The point of contact between them that most concerns me here – and which was of course a major consideration for Plutarch himself – is that both were by conviction Platonists (Dion, of course, an associate of Plato himself (and possibly even bank-roller of the Academy), Brutus a follower in particular of the first century B.C. reviver of dogmatic Platonism, Antiochus of Ascalon, and of his brother Aristus, *Brutus* 2.1–2), and both chose to involve themselves in public life, to their own ultimate detriment.

Before we proceed to examine the details of their careers, however, let us turn back for a moment to a relevant passage of the *Moralia*. In the truncated little essay – whether mutilated in the manuscript tradition or left unfinished by Plutarch himself is unclear – *To an Uneducated Ruler* (779D–792F), 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. “Who, then, shall rule the ruler?”, he asks, rhetorically, at the beginning of ch. 3.

“The

*Law, king of all,*

*Both mortals and immortals,*
as Pindar says\(^3\) – not law written outside him in books or on wooden tablets or
the like, but reason ensouled within in him (ειμπυχος δων εν αυτω λογος), always
abiding within him and watching over him and never leaving his soul without
leadership."

The ruler is thus a ‘living law’, though Plutarch is careful not to go so far as
Plato in the Republic in placing his philosopher-kings above the law. He can
appeal rather to the portrayal of the ruler in the Statesman, where Plato has so
far modified his position as to grant that, while the original law-giver may
indeed be a law unto himself, all subsequent rulers, while internalizing his laws,
must uphold and live by them – and this position is continued into the Laws,
where even the members of the Nocturnal Council, though fully embodying
the constitution, are chiefly concerned with preserving it against corruption –
though minimally also with altering individual regulations that are seen no
longer to serve their purpose.

He continues a little further down (780D):

“But the educated and wise ruler has within him the voice which always speaks to
him and exhorts him. Polemon, indeed, defined love as ‘the service of the gods for
the care and preservation of the young’; one might more truly say that rulers serve
god for the care and preservation of men, in order that, of the glorious gifts which
the gods give to men, they may distribute some and safeguard others.”

He expands on this for a little, describing how Nature, through the
beneficence of the Gods, sends down (or up) all the blessings of the natural
world, and then continues(780E):

“But these gifts and blessings, so excellent and so great, which the Gods bestow
cannot be rightly enjoyed nor used without law and justice and a ruler. Now
justice is the aim and end of law, but law is the work of the ruler, and the ruler is
the image of God who sets all things in order (εικων θεου του παντα κοσµουντος).”

All this is thickly interlarded with rhetoric, and bristles with quotations and
exempla, as befits the type of essay that Plutarch is composing, but a coherent
discourse of the nature of the ruler is certainly discernible, and it most closely
resembles Plato’s position in the Statesman. With the help of the examples of
Epaminondas from Greek history and Cato from Roman (781CD), he lays
emphasis on the good ruler’s providential care of his people, or of his
immediate followers, even as God cares for the universe as a whole. He
contrasts such good rulers, then, with a number of conventional tyrants,
summarizing the contrast with a fine epigram: ‘For in truth kings fear for their
subjects, but tyrants fear their subjects’ (των γαρ δντι δεδισαιν οι βασιλεις υπερ
tων αρχιµενων, οι δε τυραννοι τους αρχιµενους).

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\(^3\) Employing Fr. 169 Snell, already twice utilised by Plato, quoted at Gorg. 784B and
referred to at Laws III 690B.
He sums up his position as follows, driving home the parallelism God – Sun – Ruler (781F–782A):

“For it is neither probable nor fitting that God is, as some philosophers say, mingled with matter, altogether passive as it is, and with things which are subject to countless necessities, chances and changes. On the contrary, somewhere up above in contact with that nature which, in accordance with the same principles, remains always as it is, established, as Plato says, ‘upon holy pedestals’, proceeding in accordance with nature in his straight course, he reaches his goal. 4 And as the sun, his most beautiful image, appears in the heavens as his mirrored likeness to those who are able to see him in it, just so he has established in states the light of justice and of knowledge of himself as an image which the blessed and the wise copy with the help of philosophy, modelling themselves after the most beautiful of all things.”

Plutarch, then, has a pretty coherent concept of the nature of the good ruler. Let us see how first Dion and then Brutus measure up to this.

II

Plutarch begins his pair of Lives (Dion, 1) with a general reflection, applicable to both characters:

“Both, then, set out from one training-school, as it were (sc. the Platonic Academy), to engage in the greatest struggles. And we need not wonder that, in the performance of actions that were often kindred and alike, they bore witness to the doctrine of their teacher in virtue, that wisdom and justice must be united with power and good fortune if public careers are to take on nobility as well as substance.” (trans. B. Perrin, adapted). 5

One might reasonably ask where exactly Plato makes such a statement as this, but in fact, I think, it can be taken as an adaptation to the ‘real world’ of Plato’s principle, as set out in the Republic, that only in an ideally-constituted state would a truly philosophical spirit find a suitable environment in which to operate, and that would constitute the ‘power and good fortune’ to which Plutarch refers, though in the context in which Plutarch is operating the reference has to be to attaining, and holding, power in an imperfectly-constituted existing state.

4 A graceful blend, here, of three key Platonic passages on the nature of the realm of Forms and of God, Phaedo 78D, Phaedrus 254B, and Laws IV 716A.

5 ἦσσαν ἐκ μίας ἐφημήσεως ἄμφοτέροι πολείστρος ἐπὶ τούς μεγάστοις ἀρχῶνοι, καὶ τὸ μὲν ὅμοιο πολλὰ καὶ ὀσπερφα πράξαντοι μαρτυρήσαν τῷ καθήμενόν τῆς ἀρετῆς ὅτι δεῖ φρονήσει καὶ δικαιοσύνην δύναμιν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ τύχην συνελθεῖν, ἵνα κάλλιον ἄρα καὶ μέγεθος αἱ πολιτικαὶ πράξεις λάβωσιν, οὐ θαυμαστὸν ἐστιν. All subsequent translations will be based on Perrin (Loeb), emended as necessary.
Dion, of course, starts out close to the centre of power in Syracuse in the early decades of the fourth century, as being the brother-in-law of Dionysius I, but it was a distinctly precarious perch to occupy. Dionysius was not a man who was inclined to spare anyone, including his own immediate family, if they appeared to him to constitute any kind of threat to his power, nor was he notably amenable to high-minded political advice. Dion’s privileged position, therefore, was a two-edged sword, and the more high-minded he grew, under the influence of Plato’s teaching, the more precarious did his position become.

Plutarch is, of course, predisposed always to see the best in his hero, but he does nonetheless allow us to discern that Dion’s conspicuous virtue could also constitute a problem. Dion was a distinctly single-minded fellow, but with this went, as so often in such cases, something of an unbending character and intolerance of other views, and this was ultimately to prove his downfall. Plutarch tells us (4.1) that, even before Plato appeared on the scene in 388/7, Dionysius – presumably to test young Dion – ordered his treasurers to give him whatever he asked for, but also to tell him the same day what that was; and this test he plainly passed with flying colours.

When Plato arrived, conversation with him “quickly set the young man’s soul on fire” (ἀνεφλέχθη τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ ὀνεί), and he immediately felt that his crusty old brother-in-law should experience the benefits of philosophical discourse as well. This early example of his extreme lack of realism and tact, if we believe the accounts of it, led to one of the more famous and dangerous confrontations of Plato’s career, though Dion himself appears to have survived unscathed. However, Plutarch does, albeit most sympathetically, let

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6 Mystery surrounds the initial contact between Plato and Dion. Someone (perhaps Archytas?) must have arranged the introduction; but Dion was only twenty, after all, and should not have yet been that conspicuous for virtue, while Plato himself, though now already forty, can hardly have been internationally famous, having (as we believe) as yet composed hardly anything. Plutarch presents the meeting between them as simply ‘divine good fortune’ (ὅσιγ τινὶ τῷ χή) – borrowing the thought from Plato himself in the Seventh Letter (326D) – and Plato throws no more light on how the first meeting came about than this.

7 Though we do not, I think, have to believe that Dionysius secretly ordered the Spartan admiral Pollis, who gave Plato a lift home, either to kill his passenger on the return journey, or to sell him as a slave. Since there was a war on at the time between Athens and Sparta, Pollis, with the best will in the world, could not safely take him any further than Aegina, and it was, I would suggest, simply bad luck that the Aeginetans had recently passed a resolution to sell all Athenians that they laid hands on as slaves. But it is certainly an odd story.

8 “In spite of all this,” says Plutarch (4, 4), “Dion stood in no less honour and credit with Dionysius than before, but had the management of most important embassies, as, for instance, when he was sent to Carthage and won great admiration.” Dionysius also, it seems, put up with various instances of ‘freedom of speech’ (παρθένεια) from his young
slip in this connexion a significant aspect of his character which was to lead ultimately to his death: his single-minded conviction that rationality – or at least what he conceived of at any given time to be rational – should prevail in all minds to which it was presented (4, 3):

“As soon as he got a taste of a rational philosophy which led the way to virtue, his soul was speedily on fire, and since he very artlessly and impulsively expected, from his own ready obedience to the call of higher things, that the same arguments would have a like persuasive force with Dionysius, he earnestly set to work and at last brought it to pass that the tyrant, in a leisure hour, should meet Plato and hear him discourse.” (trans. Perrin)

This impulse of his, as we have seen, was not at all a good idea; and yet its outcome did not ultimately deter him from even more utopian schemes, when Dionysius died, twenty years later. With the younger Dionysius his relationship was somewhat different, since he was now the older man, and stood to him in the relationship of uncle, as well as, once again, brother-in-law. Relying on this position, he seems to have straghtway set about trying to remould Dionysius II, who was a fairly witless and dissipated young man, into something like a Platonic philosopher-king.

In this connexion, we must assume, I think, some continuity of contact between Dion and Plato over the intervening twenty years, at least in the form of exchanges of letters, and perhaps, on Plato’s part, of copies of his published dialogues. At any rate, when Dion got to work on Dionysius after his accession, seeking to make of him ‘a king instead of a tyrant’ (10, 2), he was able, along with exhortations, to present him with logoi of Plato (11, 1). Of course, these may simply be ‘arguments’ of Plato’s, communicated to Dion by letter, but it sounds as if Plutarch means them to be something more. Plato, at this stage (367 B.C.), may be assumed to be well advanced on the composition of the Republic, and indeed, in that work, he throws out a few hints that he is thinking in terms of the conversion of the sons of existing rulers as a way of establishing his ideal commonwealth (cf. VI 499D, or at VII 540D, where he envisages a single philosopher-king as an alternative to a plurality of them.). Something of his plans, at any rate, he must have communicated to Dion.

However, once again, Dion’s character constituted a problem. No doubt, in the face of the intransigent and unscrupulous opposition of the courtiers, who stood to lose heavily if anything like a Platonic utopia were established at Syracuse, his efforts were doomed from the start, but Plutarch allows us to know that his personality was against him (8, 1–2):

brother-in-law. He doubtless felt that he was harmless, while being useful in various ways.

9 The relationship here is somewhat convoluted, since, as well as being the brother of Aristomache, Dionysius’ step-mother, Dion also married one of her daughters, Arete, while Dionysius married the other, Sophrosyne.
“Dion then, as was natural, was obnoxious to these men (sc. the courtiers), since he indulged in no pleasure or youthful folly. And so they tried to calumniate him, by actually giving to his virtues plausible names of vices; for instance, they called his dignity haughtiness, and his boldness of speech self-will. Even when he admonished, he was thought to denounce, and when he would not share men’s sins, to hold them in contempt. And in very truth his character had naturally a certain majesty (δυρχος), together with a harshness that repelled intercourse and was hard to deal with (τραχύτης δυσπρόσοδος ἐντεύξει καὶ δυσξύμβολος). For not only to a man who was young and whose ears had been corrupted by flattery was he an unpleasant and irksome associate, but many also who were intimate with him and who loved the simplicity and nobility of his disposition, were apt to find fault with the manner of his intercourse with men, on the ground that he dealt with those who sought his aid more rudely and harshly than was needful in public life.”

Plutarch goes on to cite an admonition from Plato (admittedly from the pretty certainly spurious Fourth Letter) in support of this analysis. It is a most interesting testimony on Plutarch’s part, since the whole tenor of his narrative is strongly favourable to Dion, but he is at the same time constrained to admit that his hero has certain flaws of character, such as are indeed going to contribute to his final downfall. It is to the circumstances of this downfall that we should now turn.

The first signs of trouble surface shortly after his victory over Dionysius, in the form of a craftily-phrased letter to him from Dionysius, disguised as a letter from his son (31. 1–3). This the Syracusan assembly wished to excuse him from reading out in public, but Dion’s strict sense of propriety demanded that he do this. The letter was ingeniously crafted to cast maximum odium upon Dion, by making mention of his past close association with the tyranny, and urging him not to give liberty to the Syracusan people, who would not appreciate it, but rather to assume the tyranny himself.

Now we cannot assume that Dionysius can have hoped that Dion would have been so pigheaded an advocate of ‘transparency’ in government as to have the letter read out in public, but perhaps he reckoned that, even if he kept it private, its contents would leak out in some way or other, and cause suspicion among the people. At any rate, as Plutarch tells us (32. 1), the people gave Dion no credit for his exercise in ‘transparency’, but rather “found

10 Plutarch uses both of these notable epithets elsewhere in the Lives, the former, in a hostile sense, of Demetrius (42.1), the latter, more sympathetically, of Phocion (5.1).

11 Plutarch does tell us, though, a little later on (17. 2), that when Dion was staying in Athens after his exile in 366 and attending the Academy, Plato assigned Speusippus to him as a special companion, “for he desired that Dion’s disposition should be tempered and sweetened (ἀφθονεσσαία τοῦ Διώνος τό ἡθος) by association with men of charming presence who indulged seasonably in graceful pleasantries.” The austerity of his disposition was therefore pretty notorious.
occasion for suspecting and fearing him, on the ground that he was under a strong necessity of sparing Dionysius, and at once turned their eyes towards other leaders.”

The beneficiary of this disaffection turned out to be a certain Heracleides, who had himself been a servant of the tyranny, but had quarrelled with Dionysius and gone into exile, and now returned, in the wake of Dion’s victory. Plutarch portrays him as a shameless time-server and crowd-pleaser, “irresolute, fickle, and least to be relied upon as partner in an enterprise involving power and glory” (32. 2). However, he had “a certain natural gift of persuading and moving a populace that seeks to be courted.”

Plutarch embarks here on a theme which he will carry forward to the end of the biography, that of Dion as the wise and moderate physician of souls and of the state, pitted against the volatile, witless and self-indulgent mob of the Syracusans. Plutarch is, of course, no friend to democracy, and he finds in the Syracusans and their behaviour after being freed by Dion a paradigm of what can become of a populace drunk with freedom and out of control. Here he adds to his critique of Heracleides (32. 3) that “he won over (the Syracusans) that much the more easily because they were repelled by the gravity (τὸ σεμνὸν) of Dion, which they resented as severe and out of place in a public man, because their power had given them license and boldness, and they wished to be flattered by popular leaders before they were really a people (πρὸ τοῦ δήμος εἶναι τὸ δημαρχεῖσθαι θέλοντες).”

What does Plutarch mean by “before they were really a people”? I suspect what he has in mind is, ‘before they had undergone the proper Platonic paideia,’ which is the only condition on which a people may be allowed a measure of discretion in ruling itself. And it is this paideia which Dr. Dion was plainly bent on administering. Such a project could only end in tears.

What happens next, in fact, is that Heracleides progressively insinuates himself into the good graces of the populace. He is appointed admiral by the assembly (32.1), whereat Dion lodges a dignified protest that this diminished his position as supreme commander (αὐτοκράτωρ), the people reluctantly back down, and then Dion appoints him admiral. A series of other incidents ensue, culminating the following summer in the deposing of Dion from the generalship by the assembly, and the election of a new board of twenty-five generals, including Heracleides. In this connection, Plutarch explicitly employs the medical metaphor so beloved of Plato (37. 4):

“So the people, attempting, as it were, to stand at once upon their feet after their long sickness of tyranny, and to act the part of independence out of season, stumbled in their undertakings, and yet resented Dion, who, like a physician, wished to subject the city to a strict and temperate regimen (βουλόμενον ὡσπερ ἱατρόν ἐν ἁκριβεῖ καὶ σωφρονοῦσῃ διεύθυντο κατασχεῖν τὴν πόλιν).”
Dion bows out, therefore, and makes a dignified retreat with his mercenaries to neighbouring Leontini, where he awaits developments. The Syracusans come to grief, of course, in the way that indisciplined rabble will, by going hog-wild and giving way to reckless carousals after a minor victory they achieve over some reinforcements for the tyrant’s garrison that arrive under the command of a certain Nypsius (41. 2–3). Their generals, being slaves to the mob, exercise no leadership. Nypsius sees his chance, breaks out of the citadel, and ravages the city. The people are forced into a grovelling appeal to Dion to reassume the command, which he graciously agrees to do (43. 1–3).

Once again, Dion has a chance to dispose of Heracleides, and is urged strongly by his associates to do so, but he feels that he must be magnanimous. As Plutarch puts it (47. 2):

“But Dion tried to soften their resentment, saying that while other generals trained themselves mostly for arms and war, he himself had studied for a long time in the Academy how to conquer anger, envy, and all contentiousness; and it was no manifestation of such self-mastery, he said, when one was kind to friends and benefactors, but when one who had been wronged was merciful and mild towards the erring. Besides, he wished men to see that he was superior to Heracleides, not so much in power and wisdom, as in goodness and justice; for therein lay real superiority.”

This is all very well, but it does not stop Heracleides plotting against him incessantly, and finally, Plutarch tells us (53. 3), Dion is prevailed upon by his more prudent friends to have Heracleides assassinated. This clears the way for Dion to pursue his aim for Syracuse, which turns out to be what Plutarch characterizes, approvingly, as a ‘mixed constitution’, on the model of Sparta or Crete, but what more ill-conditioned persons would describe as a straightforward oligarchy; and that is certainly how it appeared to the Syracusan populace. The situation was aggravated by Dion’s sending off to Corinth – admittedly the mother-city of Syracuse, but a firm oligarchy – for ‘counsellors and colleagues’ (σύμβουλοι και συνάρχοντες). As Plutarch describes his motives (53. 2):

“He had it in mind to put a curb upon the unmixed democracy in Syracuse, regarding it as not a civil polity, but rather, in the words of Plato, a ‘bazaar of polities’ (ὡς οὖν πολιτείας, ἀλλὰ παντοπόλιον πολιτείων); also to establish and set in order a mixture of democracy and royalty, somewhat after the Spartan and

12 We may note that Dion does not appear to be attracted by Plato’s proposal in the Laws for an equality in land-holding, since, when a redistribution of land is proposed (37. 3) – admittedly a cornerstone of democratic revolutionary politics – he is quick to suppress it. But of course the Syracusan mob would be far from qualified to enrol in Plato’s Magnesia, so he is not really being un-Platonic here.

13 A reference to Republic VIII 557D.
Cretan fashion, wherein an aristocracy should preside, and administer the most important affairs.”

One can well see that this would confirm the worst fears of Heracleides and the Syracusan people, and the situation was not helped by Dion’s notable deficiencies in the public relations area. After the demise of Heracleides, another, rather unexpected, champion of the people arose in the person of the Athenian Callippus, an Athenian who had befriended Dion during his sojourn in Athens – though not, Plutarch is careful to specify (54.1), as a fellow-philosopher. This man had accompanied Dion on his original expedition, and was regarded by him as a close friend and confidant.14

Plutarch does not like Callippus one bit, and he paints him in the direst colours, but it is possible to see him also as a genuine Athenian democrat who had become increasingly depressed by the direction in which Dion was going, and decided that it was his duty to put a stop to him. At any rate, that is what he did, with the help of some disaffected members of Dion’s mercenary force, to the great joy of the Syracusans.

It is a sad tale, but it does serve to remind us what an uphill struggle must await anyone setting out to establish anything like a Platonic ideal state in any part of the real world. One certainly cannot afford to be high-minded or finicky about dealing with one’s opponents. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Mao Tse-Tung, for example, may have had high ideals when they started out, but they were never squeamish about their methods of attaining or holding onto power, and that made the difference between their fates and that of either of our heroes.

III

A similar case to Dion’s is that of M. Junius Brutus, with whom I will necessarily deal somewhat more briefly. His initial situation was rather different to that of Dion, but many similarities arise as his story unfolds, and it is these that attracted Plutarch to compare them. Unlike Dion, Brutus was not born close to the centre of a ruling power, there being no such definite power in the Roman Republic in the last century B.C.E. (Brutus was born, probably, in 85 B.C. or so); but he was not that far from the centre of power either. He came of a deeply respected family, being notionally a descendant of that Lucius Junius Brutus who slew the last of the Tarquins and founded the Roman Republic, becoming its first consul in 509 B.C.15

14 Plutarch makes quite a point of the fact that Callippus had sponsored Dion in his initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries – he was his mystagōgos.
15 Enemies of Brutus liked to point out that, since the original Brutus was reputed to have executed his two sons for treason, he cannot have had any direct descendants, and
This ancestry, however, while being an honour, was also something of a burden, since tyrant-slaying was a dominant feature of the family history, and one might in consequence feel called upon to do one’s bit in that area oneself, should occasion arise. Brutus grew up a serious young man, rather like Dion, but instead of experiencing the overwhelming influence of a visiting philosopher, as was the case of Dion in respect of Plato, he was subject to the domestic influence of the Stoic philosopher M. Porcius Cato, the brother of his mother Servilia. His initial philosophical influences were therefore Stoic rather than Platonist; however, as Plutarch tells us (2.1–2), on reaching maturity, while there was practically no school of philosophy that he did not sample,16 “he devoted himself particularly to the followers of Plato.” And, among these, he further specifies, he did not favour the sceptical New Academy, but devoted himself rather to so-called ‘Old Academy’ of Antiochus of Ascalon, who had initiated a return to Platonist dogmatism about the time of Brutus’ birth, and whose Stoicizing tendencies were conspicuous. Antiochus himself was by now dead, but Brutus took up with his brother and successor to the headship, Aristus (perhaps initially during his trip to the East on the staff of his uncle Cato in 58), and made him, according to Plutarch, his house-philosopher (φίλος καὶ συμβιώτης) – though how this squared with Aristus’ continuing to run the Platonic School is not clear.

Brutus’ father had been a partisan of M. Aemilius Lepidus, who had gone into revolt against the Sullan constitution in 78, in consequence of which Brutus senior had been treacherously executed by Pompey after surrendering to him at Mutina in 77, and Brutus could never afterwards bring himself to speak to his father’s murderer; but nevertheless, says Plutarch, when it came time to choose in the Civil War between Pompey and Caesar in 49, “thinking it his duty to put the public good above his own, and holding that Pompey’s grounds for going to war were better than Caesar’s, he attached himself to Pompey.” We seem to discern here a character very similar in high-mindedness to that of Dion.

Caesar, nonetheless, pardoned him after Pharsalus, and even took him into his confidence. He was plainly impressed by him. Plutarch tells us (6. 4–5):

“And it is said that Caesar, when he first heard Brutus speak in public, said to his friends, ‘What this young man wants I don’t know, but everything that he wants he wants very much.’ For the weightiness (τὸ ἐμβρῆσις) of his character, and the fact that no one found it easy to make him listen to appeals for favour, but that he performed what good deeds he performed through rational calculation and free

Brutus was probably descended from some steward or hanger-on of the family; but the philosopher Posidonius, Plutarch tells us (1. 5), loyal maintained that there was actually a third, younger son, and that it was from him that the family was descended.

16 Presumably not the Epicureans, who would be beyond the pale for anyone concerned to pursue a public career.
choice, made his efforts, wherever he directed them, powerful and efficacious. No flattery could induce him to grant an unjust petition, and that inability to withstand shameless importunity, which some people call ‘easygoing-ness’ (δυσσωτείσθαι), he regarded as most disgraceful in a man of substance, and he was accustomed to remark that those who were unable to refuse anything, in his opinion must have sullied their reputations in their youth (μὴ καλῶς τὴν ὧραν διατεθείσθαι).17

Shades of Dion, here, surely! It was this quality in Brutus, it seems (Plut. 8.1), that most impressed Julius Caesar (so unlike himself as it was!), and induced him to trust him – a trust, as it turned out, that was sadly misplaced. For, within a year or so of being pardoned at Pharsalus, overborne by his increasing alarm at the turn that Caesar’s rule was taking and by those who were incessantly urging him to emulate his great ancestor, Brutus had begun to plot.

The details of the plot need not concern us in the present context – except perhaps for the curious incident, related by Plutarch in ch. 12, of the real live Ciceronian-style philosophical dialogue that Brutus arranges between himself and his friends Statilius the Epicurean, Favonius the Stoic, and the lawyer Q. Antistius Labeo, apparently on some such topic as ‘What conditions in the state would justify insurrection?’ – really a test of the reliability of all of them, which the first two fail, and Labeo passes, while Brutus himself says nothing.

After the assassination of Caesar, however, Brutus, like Dion, exhibits traits of philosophical high-mindedness which contribute to his ultimate downfall. Like Dion with regard to Heracleides, Brutus resists the urgings of his less scrupulous associates that Antony should be done away with (18. 2), partly because he felt it would be unjust to kill anyone else but Caesar himself, and partly, Plutarch tells us, because he hoped for a change of heart in Antony: “for he would not give up the belief that Antony, who was a man of good parts, ambitious, and a lover of fame, if once Caesar were out of the way, would assist the country in attaining its liberty.”

No such luck. Antony in fact went along with the tyrannicides for a short while, but then Brutus committed a further error of judgement. The question came up of Caesar’s last will and testament, whether it should be read out in public, and whether Caesar should be accorded a public funeral. Brutus’ colleague Cassius firmly opposed both these measures, but Antony demanded them, and Brutus’ sense of propriety required him to assent. This, remarks Plutarch (20.1 – 2), was his second mistake: “for by sparing Antony’s life as he had done, he incurred the charge of raising up against the conspirators a bitter

17 This is not easy to translate idiomatically. LSJ renders it as ‘being susceptible to importunity’, which is what it means, but one wishes for something snappier. Perrin’s ‘timidity’ is quite inadequate, but I sympathize with his problem.

18 Quite a strong statement: he means, virtually, that they must have prostituted themselves.
and formidable foe; and now, in allowing Caesar’s funeral rites to be conducted as Antony demanded, he committed a fatal error.”

The upshot was, of course, that the conspirators had to leave town in something of a hurry, and in fact Brutus and Cassius headed off to the East, in the hope of raising an adequate army to oppose Caesar’s veterans. On landing in Athens, however (24. 1), Brutus straightway checked in to the Platonic School, now run by a certain Theomnestus of Naucratis (though also calling on the Peripatetic Cratippus), and to all appearances devoted himself to philosophical discussions – though in fact, Plutarch tells us, “he was getting ready for war.” This slightly unworldly bookishness, though, recalls something Plutarch tells about his activities on the eve of the battle of Pharsalus, back in 48, where he spent all his spare time composing an epitome of Polybius’ Histories (4. 4)!

The process of gathering forces with which to face Antony and Octavian at the final showdown at Philippi need not concern us, though Plutarch does not fail to present repeated contrasts between the honourable and conscientious behaviour of Brutus and the much rougher and more unscrupulous actions of Cassius – who, he emphasises, favoured the Epicurean creed (37. 1). He gives a nice characterization of them both in ch. 29 (1–2):

“Cassius had the reputation of being an able soldier, but harsh in his anger, and with an authority based largely on fear, although with his familiars he was rather prone to laughter and fond of banter. But the virtues of Brutus, as we are told, made him beloved by the multitude, adored by his friends, admired by the nobility, and not hated even by his enemies. For he was remarkably gentle and large-minded, free from all anger, pleasurable indulgence and greed, and kept his purpose erect and unbending in defence of what was honourable and just.”

– in other words, very much the Platonist in politics, though, on the basis of this description, considerably more ‘user-friendly’ than Dion. 20

IV

In their deaths, Dion and Brutus diverge, for reasons not unconnected with their characters. Dion was disposed of by a close associate, who felt that he was aiming at the suppression of liberty. Brutus arranged his own death, following on his defeat at Philippi, but surrounded by friends who were devoted to him to the end, fighting for the preservation of ‘liberty’ as he saw it, which meant

19 This is not as much of an eclectic choice as it might appear, since Cratippus was actually a follower of Antiochus of Ascalon, who had deviated mildly in the Peripatetic direction.

20 Though this, we may note, is not a point that Plutarch makes in his synkinesis, while making many other interesting comparisons.
in fact the continuation of the (benign and wise) rule of a senatorial oligarchy. Dion’s aim was probably in fact not far different from this, but in the context of democratic Syracuse, it appeared woefully reactionary. The aims of both, however, were thoroughly Platonic.

The context of Brutus’ death, however, calls forth from Plutarch an interesting reflection (47. 4), which he repeats in his synkrisis (2. 1). We know from various passages in the Moralia,\(^{21}\) to which I have referred in the previous article above-mentioned, that Plutarch was intellectually convinced of the inevitability and rightness of the Roman Empire, and that therefore those who stood in the way of its creation, however noble and sincere they might be, were engaged in a hopeless struggle against the course of history. He gives voice to that sentiment here:

“But since, as it would seem, the government of Rome could no longer be a democracy, and a monarchy was necessary, God, wishing to remove from the scene the only man who stood in the way of him who was able to be sole master, cut off from Brutus the knowledge of that good fortune,\(^{22}\) although it very nearly reached him in time.”

In the synkrisis, again, he points up the contrast between the regimes which Dion and Brutus set out to overthrow, as follows:

“And indeed it was not a like thing for Syracuse to be rid of Dionysius and Rome of Caesar. For Dionysius was an avowed tyrant, and filled Sicily with countless ills; whereas the rule of Caesar, although during its establishment it gave no little trouble to its opponents, still, after they had been overpowered and had accepted it, they saw that it was a tyranny only in name and appearance, and no cruel or tyrannical act was authorized by it; indeed, it was plain that the state required a monarchy, and that Caesar, like a most gentle physician, had been assigned to them by the Divinity itself (καὶ ἐν τῆς Μόραλις 21 to which I have referred in the previous article above-mentioned, that Plutarch was intellectually convinced of the inevitability and rightness of the Roman Empire, and that therefore those who stood in the way of its creation, however noble and sincere they might be, were engaged in a hopeless struggle against the course of history. He gives voice to that sentiment here:

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So things were doubly difficult for Brutus: not only is he a Platonist trying to operate in the rough-and-tumble world of practical politics; he is up against history itself, or rather, the Demiurge directing historical development for the best. A philosopher-king should not have to confront such a situation!

Bibliography


\(^{21}\) See specifically, his essay On the Fortune of the Romans, but cf. also Principles of Statecraft (824CD), and On the Oracles at Delphi (408BC).

\(^{22}\) That is to say, that his forces had won an important sea-battle, depriving Octavian and Antony of essential supplies.