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**Egyptian knowledge at Plutarch’s table: Out of the question?**

**Abstract:** Among all ‘barbaric’ cultures, that of Egypt seems to have been of specific appeal to the Chaeronean. Plutarch’s knowledge of Egyptian religion and mythology is most obviously attested in the *On Isis and Osiris*, but his interest in Egyptian matters radiates throughout his entire oeuvre, including the *Table Talk*. This study aims to investigate how the *Table Talk* reflects Plutarch’s attitude towards Egyptian culture. Such an analysis seems relevant, because recent scholarship has especially underlined the panhellenic point of focalisation in this work, arguing that the sympotic setting of the discussions expresses a strong sense of hellenocentrism and Greek cosmopolitanism. This contribution takes an open stance towards Plutarch’s hellenocentrism, arguing that the Chaeronean was primarily concerned with the philosophy, rather than the socio-cultural dynamic, behind non-Greek cultural manifestations.

> Now do we know that there is no mid-centre of earth or of ocean; Yet if there be, it is known to the gods, but is hidden from mortals.  
> *De def. or.* 409F, transl. F.C. Babbitt

**Plutarch’s vision of non-Greek culture**

Plutarch is commonly known as a well-educated Greek of Boeotian descent, who lived and worked in the socio-political reality of the Roman Empire.¹ His intellectual interests were not, however, confined to an exploration of the dominant Graeco-Roman culture. In several writings, the Chaeronean demonstrates an intellectual openness to the habits and achievements of other—for that matter ‘barbaric’—nations (understood as unities both in geographical and cultural terms). From an entry in the Lamprias Catalogue we know, for instance, that he had actually composed a collection of *Barbarian Questions*.² He there probably sought to explain specific non-Graeco-Roman phenomena in a zetetic-aetiological fashion after the manner of the *Greek* and *Roman Questions*. This is not to say that Plutarch’s stance comes even near to the standards of the contemporary ideology of multiculturalism. As is well known, the Chaeronean was not at all shy to provide an *interpretatio Graeca*

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¹ See, e.g., Boulogne (1994).

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110539479-020
of a great many non-Greek phenomena, which is mostly interpreted as a hellenocentric attempt to reduce foreign cultures to Greek models.³

This contribution aims to address this very issue of Plutarch’s hellenocentrism, taking an open stance towards its actual range and purpose. To this end, I argue that Plutarch was primarily concerned with the philosophy, rather than the sociology, behind cultural manifestations, be they Greek or non-Greek. This implies that his interest was not just motivated by scholarly interests but had a primary philosophical end. As such, non-Greekness (predicated on a broad category of foreign knowledge, which is in turn linked to specific geographical locations outside of the Greek territory) operates as an integral topos in Plutarch’s wider philosophical programme. The fact that it both attracts and repels—just as the truth does—is very germane to this idea.

The concept of empire may be key here. A link can be drawn with Alexander’s imperialism and cosmopolitanism as pictured in On the Fortune of Alexander 329B–D. Plutarch there reports on Alexander’s criticism of Aristotle’s categorial thinking about the human race.⁴ Aristotle divided all mankind in two groups—Greeks and barbarians—and advised his pupil to treat the first as friends, after the manner of a leader (ἡγεμονικῶς), and the second as enemies, after the manner of a tyrant (δεσποτικῶς). Alexander opposes this classification by positing that all peoples who strive for virtue (ἀρετή) are basically Greek, whereas those who strive for vice (κακία) are barbaric, thus subordinating their different cultural habits and customs as incidental attributes to the category of morality—Greekness, however, still being the common denominator for the positive side of the ethical spectrum.⁵

This contribution will try to demonstrate that a similar re-categorisation lies at the basis of Plutarch’s view on Egyptian culture, which among all ‘barbaric’ cultures seems to have been of specific appeal to the Chaeronean. Plutarch’s knowledge of Egyptian religion and mythology is most obviously attested in the On Isis and Osiris, but his interest in Egyptian matters permeates his entire oeuvre, including the Table Talk.⁶ The institution of the symposium was a central space for convivial interaction, where intellectual discussions of multifarious topics among learned gentlemen served as a means to promote the participants’ sense of socio-cultural and intellectual-philosophical community. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate how the Table Talk in particular reflects Plu-

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³ Scholars have argued that the regular allusion to Greek values in a work like the Roman Questions or in the biographies of Roman statesmen reveals a clear tendency, on Plutarch’s side, to perceive Roman culture in a Greek way. For the Lives, see, e.g., Swain (1996) 137–145 (esp. 139); Frazier (1996) 279–281; Duff (1999), esp. 287–309; Schmidt (1999) 327. For the Roman Questions, see, e.g., Boulogne (1992) 4701–4703; Preston (2001). However, Boulogne (1992) 4703–4707 also points to the underlying philosophical motivation of Plutarch’s study of Roman culture.

⁴ = Arist., fr. 658a Rose.


⁶ Some passages may contain actual remnants from Plutarch’s Quaestiones Aegyptiacae. See Boulogne (2005) 197–198.
tarch’s attitude towards the Egyptian culture. Such an analysis seems relevant, because recent scholarship has especially underlined the panhellenic point of focalisation in this work, arguing that the sympotic setting of the discussions expresses a strong sense of hellenocentrism and Greek cosmopolitanism.⁷ Greek culture was, of course, very influential within the confines of the Roman Empire, but in this study the perspective will shift to its cultural periphery.

**Analysis of the Egyptian passages**

In Plutarch’s symposia people speak Greek, the *lingua franca* of the elite living in and around the Mediterranean region, but not everyone can, therefore, call himself a Greek by birth. Ammonius, notably, Plutarch’s teacher in Athens, was of Egyptian origin, and Plutarch also had several other Egyptian friends.⁸ One may presume that the friend-making (*φιλοποιόν*) atmosphere at the symposium would certainly require a certain intellectual openness and friendliness towards their domestic culture as well. In any case, a true πεπαιδευμένος would automatically be inclined to demonstrate or acquire some outlandish knowledge to or from his fellow symposiasts, be they Greek or not. As Jean Hani has noted, moreover, it seems unlikely that Ammonius did not draw his students’ attention to Egyptian things.⁹ Plutarch had actually made a study journey to Egypt himself (following in the footsteps of numerous Greek wise men like Plato and Pythagoras, to mention only his philosophical favourites),¹⁰ and in the city of Alexandria he probably encountered and questioned several men of letters, philosophers and hellenised Egyptian priests.¹¹ Besides these real-life Alexandrian informants, Plutarch presumably also had a number of books at his disposal, especially Herodotus, from which he could draw information on specific Egyptian topics.

On the basis of this variety of Plutarch’s Egyptian sources of information the analysis below will distinguish between all-round intellectual and broadly philosophical-religious topics. Reference to Egyptian matters is often made in passing, as is the case, for instance, with the allusion to Alexandrian scholarship in the very first problem of the collection (*QC* 1.1, 614A–C). The more general intellectual topics deal especially with natural phenomena that are related to the exotic Egyptian locale. But the majority of the Egyptian passages concerns more philosophical-religious matters, which are related to Egyptian mythology and the practices and beliefs

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⁷ This ties in generally with the dynamic revival of Greek self-awareness in the Second Sophistic. See, e.g., Klotz and Oikonomopoulou (2011) 3; Vamvouri Ruffy (2012) 218–220.
⁸ E.g., Theon ὁ γραμματικός (*De facie* 939C–D; *QC* 1.9, 626E; 8.8, 728F), probably to be distinguished from Theon ὁ ἔταραρ. See Clement and Hoffleit (1969) 48–49, n. b; Puech (1992) 4886.
¹⁰ *De Is. et Os.* 354D–E. Cf. Ziegler (1951) 654.
of Egyptian priests, namely, their worship of certain animals and their abstention
from certain kinds of food—an appropriate topic for discussion at the table, indeed.

**Intellectual topics**

Apart from a number of more anecdotic *faits divers* connected with Egypt as a region/
province, there is also particular interest in the natural phenomena related to its locale.
These phenomena often have a specific paradoxographical implication, stressing the
exotic and unusual character of the place where they occur. A botanical difference is,
for instance, attested in the growth of palm trees, which bear sweet dates in Egypt
and Syria, whereas in Greece their fruit is inedible (*QC* 8.4, 723C–D). It is also reported
that the earth generates mice in Egypt (*QC* 2.3, 637B). But of all the natural wonders oc-
curring in Egypt it is certainly the Nile that has attracted most attention among ancient
Greek authors. Herodotus’ aetiological account of the summer flooding of the Nile and
the location of its sources is well-known (Hdt. 2.19–34). A similar strand of Nile science
is found in *QC* 8.5, 725A–E, where the symposiasts discuss why sailors draw water from
the Nile before daybreak. The problem is of a natural philosophical kind and looks for
plausible physical explanations.¹³

The discussion of such natural problems was a much appreciated intellectual
pastime at convivial events. Other such topics that were considered suitable for
symptotic deliberation are discussed by Plutarch in the very first problem of the col-
lection, namely, *QC* 1.1, 614A–C, where allusion is made to the activities of the Alex-
andrian scholars in the Museum. Plutarch says that these topics for discussion are
supplied by history, current events, philosophy, piety and deeds of men. When
these topics are interwoven in the symptotic discussion, so he says, they will take
away the troubles caused by drunkenness. Similarly, those who mix alkanet in the
wine and sprinkle the floors with infusions of vervain and maidenhair (in their belief
that it provides some cheerfulness and gaiety to the guests)—imitate Homer’s Helen,
who secretly added a drug to the undiluted wine. They do not see, however, so Plu-
tarch adds, that that story too, having travelled a long way from Egypt (ἀπ’ Αίγυ-
πτου), should not be taken literally, but finds its end in the uttering of appropriate
and suitable words (λόγους ἐπιεικείς καὶ πρέποντας). The reference is to Homer,
*Od.* 4.220–264, where Helen, before she starts telling a tale (μῦθος) about Odysseus
to the drinking Achaeans, mixes a drug (φάρμακον) in the wine, which she received,
so Homer writes, from an Egyptian woman called Polydamna (the Egyptians were,

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¹² See, e.g., the account of the heavydrinking, heavyweight Heraclides, nicknamed Heraclous by the
Alexandrians (*QC* 1.6, 624B), or of the date of Pompey the Great’s death in Egypt (*QC* 8.1, 717C–D).
¹³ These are found in the heat of the sun corrupting the water and evaporating the lightest parts
from it, and in the mixing of the water with earth by the human and animal activity in it.
indeed, noted for their profound knowledge of medicine and pharmacopoeia).¹⁵ Plutarch’s allegorical reading of this Homeric passage, interpreting the φάρμακον as the bewitching eloquence of Helen’s story-telling itself, originates with the Alexandrian grammarians (cf. ἀπ’ Αἰγύπτου), but he gives an interesting twist to it.¹⁶ He explains that a timely conversation (λόγος, rather than μῦθος) suiting the moods and the situation at the dinner table serves as a sedative drug. Therefore, men of taste, even if they talk straightforward philosophy, do their talking with persuasive arguments rather than with cogent proofs (τοῦ πιθανοῦ μᾶλλον ἢ βιαστικοῦ). As Maria Vamvouri Ruffy observes, the transition from Helen’s μῦθος in Homer to philosophical λόγος in Plutarch suits the situation in the Table Talk very well. After all, Plutarch’s symposium is concerned with philosophical λόγοι rather than with the unreliable μῦθοι of the poets.¹⁷ Philosophy is the real φάρμακον here.

Nevertheless, several passages throughout the Table Talk demonstrate a specific interest in mythological matters, including Egyptian myths. Arguably, these mythological accounts do not just serve as redundant scholarly diversions, but are mostly incorporated to serve a specific argumentative purpose in the discussions.

Philosophical-religious topics

According to Philip Hardie, ‘[t]he interpretation of myth is often handled [by Plutarch] as an exercise in solving problems.’¹⁸ This is, indeed, generally true, seeing that it often nicely contributes to the development of Plutarch’s λόγοι. However, if we call to mind the Chaeronean’s fundamental devotion to the πάτριος πίστις¹⁹ in combination with the fact that it is his intention to practice philosophy in guarded terms at the symposium,²⁰ it is not unlikely that these mythological accounts implicitly hint at a higher level of explanation, thus in a way ‘mystifying’ the zetetic discourse at issue (which in itself settles for plausible and persuasive arguments as we saw). Hardie notes that Plutarch in many passages, indeed, ‘describes myth as a faint reflection of a transcendent truth. ... Myths act as ladders to the truth, which may then be kicked away.’²¹ This means that the myth is not an explicit record of the truth as such, but contains a deeper meaning that

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¹⁵ For further literature on the nature of Helen’s drug, see Teodorsson (1989) 52.
¹⁶ The same allegory is found in Callimachus (fr. 178.15–20 Harder), who, as Teodorsson (1989) 52 remarks, ‘was probably influenced by contemporary allegorizing commentaries on Homer’.
¹⁸ Hardie (1992) 4751.
¹⁹ Cf., e.g., De Pyth. or. 402E, Amatorius 756B. See Flacelière et al. (1987) cli–clii.
²⁰ That is, without seeming to do so, cf. QC 1.1, 614A.
²¹ Hardie (1992) 4754 (see also 4746–4749 for the relationship between myth and truth in Plutarch more generally). For Plutarch’s ambivalent attitude towards myths, see Van der Stockt (1992) 88–97. For the theory that the incorporation of mythological material (in Plutarch’s natural problems) implicitly hints at a higher level of aetiology, see Meeusen (2013).
can be brought to light by an adequate interpretation. Let us see how this works out with the Egyptian myths recorded in the Table Talk.

With regard to the problem of the number of letters in the Greek alphabet, the geometer Hermeias in QC 9.3, 738E lifts the discussion onto a mythological level by referring to the divine origin of Egyptian writing and the use of hieroglyphs. He argues that Hermes (= Toth, cf. Pl. Phdr. 274d) was the πρῶτος εὑρετής who introduced the art of writing in Egypt, and that the Egyptians, therefore, write the first letter with an ‘ibis’, the bird that belongs to this deity. In what follows, Hermeias notes, however, that, in his opinion, the Egyptians err in giving precedence among the letters to one that is inarticulate and voiceless, but with this specification he does not as such aim to reject the divine origin of the hieroglyphs. On the contrary, he actually tries to save their attribution to Hermes in what follows on grounds of a numerological account. A link can be drawn here with the previous problem in QC 9.2, 738A, where Plutarch agrees with Protagenes in accepting that Cadmus, the mythological founder of Thebes and author of the Greek alphabet, placed the letter alpha first. The underlying idea thus seems to be that the Egyptian myth errs in the particulars of the matter, but that it is correct on a more fundamental level, by virtue of accepting the divine origin of letters and writing (as is also acknowledged in Greek mythology).

A second reference to Egyptian mythology is found in QC 8.1, 718B, in the context of the divine character of the principle of generation. There, with regard to the birth (day) of the ‘divine’ Plato, Tyndares the Lacedaemonian (a Platonist) alludes to Platonic cosmogonic theories in arguing that God, who is the father and creator of the cosmos and of other created things, begets the principle of generation in matter not simply through semen, but through another divine potency (cf. Pl. Ti. 28c). In order to illustrate his argument that a god does not consort in the same (sexual) way as mortals do, but impregnates mortal nature by some other kind of contact or touch (that is, by other interventions, rather than simply through semen), Tyndares refers to the Egyptian myth of Apis (the bull-deity and incarnation of Osiris), who, according to the Egyptians, was brought to birth by a touch of the moon. In general, so Tyndares adds, the Egyptians allow that a male god has intercourse with a mortal woman, but conversely they do not believe that a mortal man can provide the principle of birth and conception to a female divinity, since they believe that the substance of the gods is located in air and breath and in certain heats and moistures.

The introductory phrase, signalling that ‘the story is not mine’ (οὐκ ἐμὸς ὁ μῦθος), puts the plausibility of Tyndares’ account in perspective. Indeed, in a parallel account in Num. 4, Plutarch takes a more critical position in the philosophical dis-

22 This is the case also, e.g., with the closing myth in the De facie. See, e.g., Donini (1986) 207; Meeusen (2013).

23 Reference to this myth is also made in De Is. et Os. 368C.

24 This is not further explained. Teodorsson (1996) 161 notes: ‘The concise description that Plut. gives here of the highest Egyptian god, Amon, who was identified with Zeus by the Greeks, corresponds to his interpretation of the myth at De Is. et Os. 365D ...’.
discussion of divine companionship. If we confront these two passages, it turns out that Plutarch does not simply take the Egyptian account for granted, but as Teodorsson notes he ‘does not develop his doubts in a regular rejection [either]. Instead it seems that he maintains an agnostic position towards the problem. The Egyptian account certainly serves as a plausible addition to Tyndares’ main argument, but its incorporation in his λόγος turns out to be somewhat ad hoc (in comparison to Num. 4.4). This does not imply, however, that there is nothing fundamentally valuable in the Egyptian account, since it can illustrate the divine character of the principle of generation in the material world, which is central to Tyndares’ argument at issue. It turns out that the Egyptians are again erroneous in the particulars of the matter, but their myths still contain a certain aspect of reliability, so that their beliefs are not implausible (cf. Num. 4.4: οὐχ ἀπιθάνως). And it is precisely the persuasiveness of the arguments, rather than the cogency of proofs, that suits philosophical discussions at symposia (as we saw earlier). Note, moreover, that this emphasis on the aspect of persuasiveness is in line with Plutarch’s loyalty to Plato and Academic Scepticism, and more precisely with the principle of εὐλαβεία, which demands an epistemic caution towards divine matters. Therefore, Tyndares’ argument is not just a noncommittal rhetorical ingenuity that cannot at least hint at the truth.

It can be added that in the social context of the symposium and the convivial protocols that it involves a person’s caution in avoiding taking up a dogmatic position in matters that lack cognitive certainty also serves as a useful means to maintain a zetetic attitude in the philosophical discussion and as an incentive to keep an open mind on how things can stand otherwise. A relevant passage to illustrate this is found in QC 5.10, 684F–685A, with regard to the problem of why salt is considered divine. Before starting to inquire into the divine nature of salt itself, Plutarch notes that the problem was complicated by the fact that Egyptian priests made it a point of religion to abstain completely from salt, so that they even eat their bread unsalted. Why then, so Plutarch wonders, if salt is favoured by the gods and divine, is it eschewed on religious grounds by the Egyptians? The question is not a rhetorical one, but requires a proper explanation. Florus, however, Plutarch’s Roman patron who hosts the symposium, urges his companions to leave the Egyptians out of the question (ἐάν ἐκέλευς τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους) and to find a proper Greek (Ελληνιστ) explanation for the problem. This reaction can be taken to imply that the complication of the initial problem may not be appropriate in light of symptic protocols (which demand that topics of discussion should not become too complex), and that Florus, in his role of συμποσιαρχος, feels obliged to steer the discussion in another direction. Perhaps, Florus (as a Roman in Greek compa-

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25 That is, with regard to Numa’s alleged communion with the goddess Egeria. For reasons of space I cannot discuss this parallel in detail here.
27 See, e.g., Donini (1986) 205.
ny) attempts to call on the Greek chauvinism of his guests, but he may have hoped for another reaction than Plutarch’s, who tries to defend the case of the Egyptians by arguing that these are actually not in conflict (μάχεσθαι) with the Greeks. The use of combat imagery adds a certain jesting tone to the politically-laden discourse, and, in what follows, Plutarch will, indeed, try to make metaphorical peace between Greeks and Egyptians.

In short, Plutarch explains that Egyptian priests abstain from salt perhaps for reasons of purity, because it has aphrodisiac properties owing to its heat, or because it is delicious as a seasoning, some even calling it charites, since it makes needful food enjoyable. A little later, Plutarch notes that salt is also considered divine, because it has preservative powers, seeing that it conserves bodies uncorrupted, just like the divine fire of lightning does, when a person is struck by it. At the end of the discussion, Philinus, a friend and fellow citizen of Plutarch, elaborates on the aphrodisiac properties of salt, noting that salt has a generative property, for which it is considered divine.

What this passage shows, basically, is how Greek theories can be supported with Egyptian knowledge. An Egyptian belief may at first seem to be in conflict (μάχεσθαι) with a Greek one, but on closer inspection the reverse appears to be true, so that a stronger case can be made with the help of it. As Teodorsson notes, Plutarch in this passage ‘appears as an expert in matters of religion, and with good reason. He was a priest of Apollo at Delphi, and knew Egyptian religion by study on the spot ...’  

Plutarch’s openness to Egyptian religion and his attempt to ally it with Greek knowledge is revealing for its place in his philosophical programme. The underlying message seems to be that knowledge about the divine principle of generation is not restricted to the Greek tradition but has transcultural value, finding a parallel also in Egyptian culture.

The custom of Egyptian priests of abstaining from salt is part of a larger hypomnematic cluster with parallel passages in De Is. et Os. 352F (they eschew salt for various reasons: it has a superfluous nature and sharpens the appetite), 363E (they are forbidden to set salt on the table), and QC 8.8, 729A–C. The latter passage deserves closer examination. The symposiasts there discuss why the Pythagoreans abstain especially from fish. The first who attempts an explanation is Theon (presumably the Egyptian γραμματικός; see n. 8). He explains that Pythagoras associated for a long time with the wise men of Egypt, and that he emulated them in many ways. Pythagoras especially approved the rituals of the priests, such as the abstention from beans (Theon refers to Hdt. 2.37.5). It is added that even in the present, Egyptian priests also abstain from fish, and that they consider it a religious duty to abstain from salt. Various reasons are given for this, so Theon says, but only

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31 On the method of cluster analysis and its application to Plutarch’s writings, see Van der Stockt (1999) and (2004). See also Meeusen (2012).
one is true (ἀληθής μία), that is, their hatred for the sea, as an element that is alien and strange to us, or rather because it is completely hostile to human nature.\textsuperscript{32}

The Greeks were a sea-faring people, which may explain why Plutarch in his subsequent criticism of Theon’s argument takes a defensive stance. Plutarch says that many people, both philosophers and laymen, would defend (μαχεῖσθαι) the sea against the Egyptians, summing up in how many ways it improved their way of life. The use of combat imagery again adds a certain jesting tone to the discourse by lifting it onto a political level: in the context of the discussion it denotes a playful rivalry in the formulation of plausible arguments. Presumably, Plutarch did not appreciate Theon’s dogmatic position in the debate (ἀληθής μία)—though he has (to a debatable extent) created it himself, and made Theon a scapegoat. Plutarch goes on to explain at length that Theon’s argument can, in fact, be reversed (διὰ τούναντίον), the Pythagoreans actually sparing sea-creatures out of regard for justice, since they do us no harm. Plutarch concludes that the abstinence from fish has been an element of religious duty not only among Egyptians (and Syrians), but among Greeks as well (meaning the Pythagoreans), and that they do this out of righteousness and to free themselves from the luxury of its consumption. This implies that there is a shared sense of justice and a transcultural morality among Greeks and Egyptians.\textsuperscript{33} Teodorsson is right, moreover, that the ethical pathos of Plutarch’s argument betrays ‘a serious commitment to the Pythagorean outlook. One of his sources of inspiration was presumably Ammonius’.\textsuperscript{34} The link between Pythagoreanism and Egyptian religion is, indeed, very substantial in this passage, considering the shared abstention from certain foods and reverence for certain animals.

The Egyptians were, in fact, noted for their animal cults, as is illustrated by two other passages in the Table Talk. In QC 7A, 703A, Lucius, one of Florus’ sons, notes that some Egyptians worship and honour the entire race of dogs, others that of wolves or crocodiles but feed only a single one of them (some a dog, some a wolf or a crocodile), because it is impossible to feed them all. The context of this account is again religious in kind: Lucius is explaining the Roman custom to take care for the holy fire in the temple of Vesta as a symbol of their reverence for all fire.

A more elaborate account of the religious practice of animal worship is found in QC 4.5, 669E–671C, where the symposiasts discuss why Jews abstain from pork. Polycrates wonders whether they do this either out of reverence for the animal or because they abhor it (cf. the disputatio in utramque partem concerning the abstention from fish above). Callistratus advocates the first option and argues that the pig enjoys a certain level of respect among the Jews. Even if this creature is misshapen and

\textsuperscript{32} Moreover, the father and saviour of their country, whom they call an emanation of Osiris (i.e. the Nile), perishes in it. Cf. De Is. et Os. 365B, 366A, 371B.

\textsuperscript{33} This idea may have specific Stoic overtones, as is also attested in Plutarch’s rejection of luxury. Cf. also De soll. an. 964E–F with Porph. Abst. 4.14, p. 251.12 Nauck. See also the anti-Stoic feature in Theon’s contrary argument, and Teodorsson (1996) 252.

\textsuperscript{34} Teodorsson (1996) 729. See also Opsomer (2009).
foul, it has no more absurd appearance or a more distasteful nature than a dung-beetle, field-mouse, crocodile or cat, which are each treated as most sacred animals by a different group of Egyptian priests. They say that the pig is honoured for reasons of usefulness (in agriculture). We need not be surprised, therefore, if some people do not eat pork, so Callistratus adds, since other animals receive even greater honours among the barbarians (παρὰ τοῖς βαρβάροις) for slight and sometimes completely ridiculous reasons. The Egyptians deify the field-mouse for its blindness, since they regard darkness—quite incompatible with Greek preconceptions—as superior to light. They also associate the lion with the sun and honour the ibis for similar dubious reasons. Callistratus wonders, however, how anyone could blame the Egyptians for such absurdity (ἀλογίας), when people say that the Pythagoreans and the Magi (the followers of Zoroaster) also honour such animals. So the Jews would kill pigs if they hated them, but in reality it is forbidden for them to slay or eat pigs.

The fact that the Pythagoreans are also mentioned among the βάρβαροι indicates that this reverence for animals is not that ‘barbaric’ after all, but, even so, it still remains an absurd practice in Callistratus’ opinion. It follows that the general category of ‘the barbaric’ overlaps with that of ‘the absurd’ here, rather than that any barbaric people in specific is targeted by Callistratus. In his study on Plutarch and the barbarians, Schmidt has demonstrated that the concept of ‘the barbaric’ often serves as a rhetorical category in Plutarch’s writings (especially aiming to produce a specific moralising effect), but that within this category no real differentiation is made between the barbarian ethnicities themselves. It remains to be seen, therefore, to what extent the Egyptians can really be called barbaric according to Plutarch himself, and what he personally thought, more precisely, of their zoolatry.

With regard to the fact that Jews also abstain from the hare, Lamprias in his ensuing argument mentions that they consider the animal’s swiftness and the sharpness of its senses divine, thus perhaps ‘thinking like Egyptians do’ (αἰγυπτιάζοντες) with regard to the animal’s qualities. The verb αἰγυπτιάζειν literally means ‘to be like an Egyptian’ and has the pejorative connotation of cunning, ‘i.e. to be sly and crafty’. In the present context, the word probably has a similar negative meaning, implying that the practice of relating animal qualities to divine categories is specifically considered to be an Egyptian procedure, by which Lamprias especially aims to underline its exotic, non-Greek character.

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35 Schmidt (1999) 332. He correctly interprets this passage in light of Plutarch’s notion of barbaric φαυλότης, showing that barbaric animal cults provoke superstition amongst the common people (ibid. 232). See De Is. et Os. 379D–E, where atheism is mentioned as the other religious extreme.
36 As Teodorsson (1990) 100 notes: ‘The focusing on Egyptian religion in this talk shows that Jewish and Egyptian religion were regarded as closely related’.
37 See LSJ, s.v.
38 He explains that the hare’s eyes are uniring, since they remain open while asleep, and that the Egyptians also admire the hare’s unrivalled sharpness of hearing, because an image of its ear serves as a character in their hieroglyphs to represent the notion of hearing.
According to Teodorsson, ‘Plut. shows that he tried, not quite successfully, to understand the specific type of deification of animals in Egyptian religion. He thought that they represented certain abstract characteristics or qualities, cf. *De Is. et Os. 355B ...’.*³⁹ Indeed, in the *On Isis and Osiris* Plutarch on a more philosophical-religious basis shows some sympathy for Egyptian animal cults. In *De Is. et Os. 382A–B*, he reports that animals held in honour in Egypt are actually mirrors (ἐσοπτρων) of the divine. They are a natural instrument or medium for God who orders all things: we should not honour these animals in themselves, but *through* them the divine (θειον).⁴⁰ This mirror metaphor ties in closely with Plutarch’s providential world view, where nature in general is considered an inferior, material reflection of the intelligible realm.⁴¹ This certainly relativises Callistratus’ negative evaluation of Egyptian animal cults. In the end, Plutarch is not expressing his own opinion but that of his fellow symposiast.

**Conclusions**

An important *caveat* that should be kept in mind while drawing our conclusions from the above analysis is that most of the Egyptian passages in the *Table Talk* substantiate very specific lines of thought, where the aspects of plausibility and rhetorical persuasion are considered seminal criteria in solving particular problems. Plutarch is not necessarily putting forward his own opinion in each case but that which suits the discussion best (cf. the apparent absurdity of Egyptian zoolatry). This explains the ambivalence at times towards Egyptian culture: in some cases the symposiasts advocate Egyptian habits or beliefs, whereas in other cases they make a stand against it (cf. the use of combat imagery). However, the incorporation of Egyptian knowledge in the *Table Talk* is not *just* for the sake of contriving ingenious and plausible arguments for complex problems; on the contrary, it often directly contributes to the sympotic speculation about the philosophical truth, which is the eventual goal of such events for Plutarch (his main interest in Egyptian culture goes to broadly philosophical-religious topics).

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⁴⁰ For further discussion, see Boulogne (2005) 203–204. See also Hirsch-Luipold (2002) 211–222. A parallel is found in *De soll. an.* 975B, where Aristotimus hyperbolically claims that he can produce thousands of signs and portents manifested by the gods (παρὰ τῶν θεῶν) through creatures of land and air. For Egyptian priests worshipping crocodiles, cf. also *De soll. an.* 976B–C.

⁴¹ See Hirsch-Luipold (2002) 285. I argue elsewhere (regarding Plutarch’s writings on ‘animal psychology’) that ‘[i]f it is true that Plutarch ‘loved’ animals almost as much as he did humans, then he loved in them what was rational and virtuous, and therefore could be considered divine.’ Meeusen (2013) 132. For further discussion see also Newmyer (2006) 17ff.
That the kind of truth Plutarch is looking for will always be heavily influenced by Greek preconceptions is less important here than his own personal conviction that this truth will eventually transgress and prevail over issues of cultural identity. Plutarch did, indeed, experience the itch for auto-definition and construction of Greek identity that is so central to the cultural politics of his time (see n. 7), but he was not blinded by it. By consequence, we should not look at him as a navel-gazing Delphic priest, but rather as a genuine enthusiast for the truth, which shines through several human cultures. Egypt had, of course, become a very hellenised country ever since its occupation by Alexander, and this Hellenisation process was further developed by the subsequent rule of the Ptolemaic dynasty and the country’s eventual annexation to the Roman empire, but its domestic, Pharaonic culture to a considerable degree retained its own exotic and mystical appeal even in Plutarch’s days, providing the necessary food for thought at the Chaeronean’s table (and desk).\footnote{On the persistence of Pharaonic traditions in Ptolemaic Egypt, cf. Stephens (2003).} Egypt served as some kind of a ‘barbaric’ paradigm or mirror culture for Plutarch (a proto-Hellenic society perhaps?), in which he could see the reflection, not only of his own Greek identity but also—and more importantly—that of a divine, transcultural entity.