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Introduction

Aristotle's *Politics* defined a city as self-sufficient and small. Aristotle knew of so-called cities, like Babylon and Sybaris, too large for their "citizens" to know one another and evaluate one another's character. Such cities were self-sufficient, but not small, and thus not true cities. Writing after Macedon had conquered the Greek *poleis*, Aristotle knew too of so-called cities that were small but not self-sufficient. Cities unable to field their own arms or powerless to arbitrate disputes among their citizens lacked the dignity that made political life choice worthy. Such cities were, in a word, "slavish." The *polis*, small and self-sufficient, was therefore the proper object of Aristotle's political philosophy, even when – perhaps especially when – it was no longer a viable political form.

When Plutarch wrote, some five hundred years after Aristotle, the small and self-sufficient *polis* of Aristotle's *Politics* was as much an object of imagination as memory. Plutarch's most profound reflection on politics nevertheless resembled Aristotle's in one crucial respect: it took as its focus the life of the *polis*. But whereas Aristotle had expressed his political philosophy in lectures, and his master Plato had written dialogues, Plutarch pioneered a literary form of his own: the *Parallel Life*. This genre allowed Plutarch to place statesmen at the center of his inquiry into politics, and it allowed them to appear in their native element – not in unaccustomed dialogue with more capable philosophers, nor waiting in the wings of lectures focused on laws and institutions, but in the flush of action and the speech proper to men of action. The *Life* also expanded the realm of action and speech accessible to the observer, breaking down the distinction between public and private by opening for evaluation great statesmen's intimate, unguarded moments. Plutarch pitted pairs of

statesmen, so exposed, in competition for his readers' approbation. The effect was a literary renaissance of the visible community in which citizens were mutually known, capable of evaluating one another, and ambitious to win one another's praise. Plutarch acted as the Lycurgus of this necropolis.

In what follows I present Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* as a work of political philosophy – a study of not only particular men and cities, but man and city. I want here to offer an outline of the argument and discuss its relation to other approaches to Plutarch's work.

Outline of the Argument

The first part of this work identifies the themes in Plutarch's political thought that will be of most interest to political theorists. This effort is necessary because Plutarch's works, which once played such a central role in Western political thought, have fallen out of favor among students of politics – even among political theorists interested in the ancient world. I begin by considering why such a change occurred in Plutarch's reception and what contemporary issues renewed attention to Plutarch's political thought might illuminate.

In Chapter 2, I argue that Plutarch's present obscurity arises not from his prominent role in the eighteenth century's republican revolutions – a role which once tarnished Plutarch's reputation in the eyes of European traditionalists – but rather from a common perception of Plutarch as a hagiographer and advocate of “great man theory.” This approach to Plutarch is mistaken. Although interested in “great natures,” Plutarch followed a number of Athenian orators and philosophers in appealing to *philotimia*, or the love of honor, rather than greatness alone, to account for the behavior of outstanding individuals. Under the Roman Empire the *philotimia* of Greek statesmen took on quite different manifestations than it had in classical Athens, however. Plutarch intended in the *Lives*, I suggest, to explore the *philotimos* statesman prior to the rise of the empire in order to illuminate the potential meaning of political action in cities with attenuated autonomy, like the Greek *poleis* under the empire.

Plutarch's thought, understood as an exploration of the honor-loving soul and the city, speaks to a number of concerns of contemporary political theorists.¹ Inasmuch as both empire and liberalism tend to diminish

¹ This third chapter leaves Plutarch (mostly) behind to consider how this book's themes appear within political theory. Readers interested only in Plutarch are welcome to proceed from Chapter 2 to Chapter 4.

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the desire for honor and allegiance to particular (i.e., non-universal) political bodies, Plutarch's relation to the Roman Empire resembles our own relation to liberalism. In Chapter 3, I explore the foundations of liberalism in Hobbes' thought and suggest that the young Hobbes' study of the Roman Empire had a pervasive influence on his more mature political philosophy. Contemporary political theorists have attempted to escape Hobbes' orbit by reconciling liberalism and honor, restoring Socratic philosophy as an alternative to the pursuit of honor, and respecting national and ethnic identities within the horizon of the liberal state. Each attempt ultimately fails to address Hobbes' concerns, but cumulatively these efforts point toward a new way of putting the problem – and this turns on what I call (following Pierre Manent) “political form.” In the final section of the chapter, I distinguish “political form” from “political regime” (such as democracy, oligarchy, or monarchy) and I argue for the existence of three essential political forms – city, nation, and empire. I conclude by suggesting how the city conceived as a political form might answer Hobbes' (and liberalism's) skepticism toward both the desire for honor and allegiance to particular political bodies.

In the second part of this work I examine Plutarch's argument about the relation of the honor-loving soul and the city in the *Parallel Lives*. Although my interpretation bears on Plutarch's work as a whole, I focus my efforts on one “book” (or pair) within the *Lives*: the *Lycurgus-Numa*. The reason for this focus is partly practical. Plutarch's *Lives*, like Plato's dialogues and Shakespeare's plays, are so individually intricate and so cumulatively expansive that their scholars face a stark choice between depth and breadth. In selecting one pair as my focus I opt for depth. The interpretation that follows from this choice is necessarily partial. As scholars of Plutarch have long recognized, however, the *Lycurgus-Numa* plays a special role in Plutarch's work as a whole: in these *Lives* the loftiness of the theme (lawgiving) and Plutarch's relative independence from historical fact (since so little is known of these protagonists) offered Plutarch a canvas on which to express with especial clarity his larger literary goals. As a result, this pair's place in the *Lives* resembles that of the *Republic* in Plato or *Hamlet* in Shakespeare: it contains but a small part of the author's writing, while expressing the essence of the author's thought.

I begin in Chapter 4 by examining the literary form of the *Life*. Plutarch wrote at some remove from the period of his protagonists, when cities were autonomous and powerful, and he was quite conscious that this historical distance raised a number of interpretive dilemmas. The author

and reader of *Lives* had to learn to praise properly: to avoid uncritical hagiography on one hand, and overcritical skepticism on the other. In the concluding scenes of both his Spartan and Roman *Lives*, Plutarch dramatizes the dangers of hero worship and cynicism, and he suggests that the *Life* as he conceived it offered a mean between these extremes. The Plutarchean *Life* is an intimate portrait, replete with candid anecdotes and memorable sayings, that allows its readers both to relate to long-distant statesmen as if they were fellow citizens and to evaluate their characters with some measure of objectivity. As a literary form, Plutarch's *Life* is intended to simulate firsthand knowledge of the sorts of individuals who lived in past political forms.

For Plutarch, Lycurgus's Sparta was the city *par excellence*. This fact alone set Plutarch apart from his philosophical forbears, the most prominent of whom looked upon Sparta as deeply flawed and ill-fated, owing to its inculcation of the love of honor (*philotimia*) rather than true virtue. Plutarch, by contrast, praises Lycurgus for recognizing that within the political form of the city, the desire for the esteem of one's fellow citizens can mimic true virtue so closely as to be indistinguishable from it. The achievement of Plutarch's Lycurgus, I suggest in Chapter 5, was to fashion laws that maximized citizens' visibility (and thus exposure to praise and blame) within the city, but minimized citizens' visibility to those outside of the regime, thus making the city an ordered world (*kosmos*) unto itself. The trouble with this approach to *philotimia* and political form, however, was that it required Spartans to understand themselves only as Spartans, and not as Greeks or as human beings – that is, they were to be isolated from others not only as a matter of policy but also as a matter of identity. As Plutarch shows in his *Agesilaus* and *Lysander*, this position proved untenable in the wake of the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars. In the Spartan *Lives*, Plutarch thus shows both the greatest possibility for the city as a political form and the flaws that arise when the city is most a city.

In contrast to Sparta, Rome transformed from a city into a stable empire. In his *Life* of Rome's lawgiver, which I examine in Chapter 6, Plutarch suggests that *philotimia* drove this transformation, but not in the manner one might expect. It was not sheer conquest that enabled Rome's expansion, but the manner in which Rome "united and incorporated with herself those whom she conquered." Plutarch presents Numa's fusion of Romans and Sabines as the paradigmatic case of incorporating a foreign people. Yet as Plutarch describes Numa's reign, this fusion did not occur as Numa intended, for in attempting to pacify the Romans,

Numa inadvertently militarizes the Sabines. He does so because he misunderstands how philosophy relates to *philotimia*. Rather than designing laws to confine *philotimia* to the *kosmos* of the city (as Lycurgus had done), Numa attempts to tame *philotimia* by opening the city to contemplation of the natural *kosmos*. Where Lycurgus entrusted civic authority to honor-loving senators, Numa empowers a new caste of philosopher-priests. The result is both a lost opportunity to influence the trajectory of Roman *philotimia* and a shattering of all horizons that might limit its expansion. By introducing invisibility into the city via his mysterious and secretive priests, Numa prepares Rome's transformation from city to empire.

Plutarch's parallelism – the *Lives*' composition in pairs of Romans and Greeks, most followed by a “comparison” (*synkrisis*) – suggests his preference for Lycurgus's mode of lawgiving to Numa's. I suggest in Chapter 7 that it is best to approach these comparisons not only as attempts to reconcile Greeks and Romans, nor as efforts to refine the ethical teaching of the preceding *Lives*, but rather as heated competitions, in which the reader is cast as the judge. It is Plutarch's intent to expose his reader to the sorts of political contests that once animated cities prior to the empire's rise and to familiarize them with the qualities of soul these competitions engaged, *philotimia* first and foremost. In arranging a literary world of intimately known personages locked in competition with one another, Plutarch resembles Sparta's lawgiver. Plutarch suggests that just as Lycurgus reconciled ambitious souls to the city, so might a literary Lycurgus reconcile the ambitious to the empire, not by trumpeting its peace but by facilitating fruitful conflict among its elements – between Greece and Rome, and between the political forms of city and empire.

Having examined Plutarch's portrayal of political form in the *Lives*, I conclude by considering the place of the city within ancient and modern political thought. The political form of the city was essential to ancient philosophical analysis of the political regime. Indeed, Aristotle argued (and Plato assumed) that regimes – modes of government rooted in a shared conception of the good – existed only with great difficulty in larger political forms. While the city made a robust form of citizenship possible, however, it also made foreign policy exceedingly difficult, particularly in the face of large nations (such as Macedon) and even larger empires (such as Rome). Greece's submission to Rome opened the door for a political science rooted not in politics as revealed through domestic regimes, but in politics as revealed in the dynamics of international power. The heirs of this new political science have conquered the contemporary world,

and yet a number of modern theorists have sought to win under this all-inclusive horizon some room for more limited political forms. It is with a view to this latter project that Plutarch's political philosophy is most revealing, for in writing *Lives* of the outstanding individuals who lived prior to the empire, Plutarch attempted – successfully, by and large – to secure allegiance to the small city and the politics it made possible, even under a more expansive imperial horizon.

In Plutarch's vision of political life, perfect autonomy was not essential to meaningful civic action. What was essential was a visceral, even if imaginative, sense of what that autonomy had once meant. In Plutarch's work the great competitions of the old regime were to be preserved in a literary form appropriate to them. The civilization that grew up contemplating these competitions could then resemble Sparta on an imperial scale, a civilization within which the closest practical analogues to Sparta, the semiautonomous cities, might retain their dignity over against the encroachments of empire.

Plutarch Studies

This book is a work of political theory, addressed in the first instance to readers who are interested in the history of political thought and only passingly familiar with Plutarch. It is my hope to win from this audience a new hearing for Plutarch and for the themes that (on my reading) were central to his political thought: the dynamics of *philotimia*, properly critical spectatorship of great competitions, and the importance of politics on a visible scale even when imaginary communities are in the ascendant.

Political theorists working on Plutarch today may have little company within their discipline, but they enjoy quite a lot of company from scholars in other fields. My own work has benefited greatly from a vast and rapidly expanding body of scholarly literature on Plutarch. I have acknowledged my many direct debts to this literature in the notes; I have also attempted in the notes to guide my nonspecialist readers onto the many paths through Plutarch's works that specialists have already traced.

Plutarch specialists will note three deviations from norms of Plutarch scholarship, which I have made in order to make the work accessible to its primary audience. First, I have not attempted to be exhaustive in my citation of scholarship. To take one of many examples, in the footnote on Plutarch and women (Chap. 5, n. 67) I list a handful of works that will benefit a reader new to Plutarch looking into this fascinating and much discussed theme, but I have also left out a number of sources. Second,

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I have attempted to confine detailed discussions of scholarly debates and minor points of interpretation to the notes, so as to make the main text accessible to nonspecialists. As a result, the notes are rather unwieldy, but this seemed an acceptable price to pay in order to articulate this book's core arguments and interpretations as clearly as possible. Third, I refer to Plutarch's works as they appear in the Loeb, rather than the Teubner, editions, and I rely largely on the Loeb translations, modifying only when necessary. The general reader is most likely to own the Dryden translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, but these translations are not especially accurate and the text – as published, for instance, in the Modern Library editions – allows reference only to page, not to chapter and section numbers; the Teubner editions, on the other hand, offer greater precision in reference to sections of Plutarch texts, but they are difficult to access outside the libraries of research universities and they contain only the Greek text of the *Lives*. The Loeb editions of Plutarch's texts are not as easily accessible as the Dryden but they are not as difficult to access as the Teubner; they allow reference to chapters and sections as well as pages (although regrettably the section numbers differ from those in the Teubner); and they contain an English translation as well as the original Greek text. They are therefore the best option for a work intended primarily for a nonspecialist audience. Apart from these three main deviations, many themes prominent within specialist literature receive little attention here: there is relatively little discussion of the historicity (or lack thereof) of Plutarch's accounts; there is more emphasis on close reading and interpretive restatement of Plutarch's text than tracing themes across Plutarch's corpus; and I have attempted to take Plutarch as my guide to his historical context, as it bears on interpretation of his work (so there is more attention, for instance, to Chaeronea and Plato than to Dion of Prusa and other figures of the Second Sophistic). All of these aspects of the present work arise not from antagonism to the specialist literature but from the work's disciplinary origin and its approach to the *Parallel Lives* as a work of political philosophy.

Nevertheless, I hope Plutarch specialists will find this work of interest in several respects. First, a number of its claims represent small but significant contributions to long-standing debates. The mutability of *philotimia* and its centrality to Plutarch's psychology of the statesman, for instance, are widely known. In Chapter 3, I bring this conversation in Plutarch studies into contact with a similar ongoing conversation in political science; in Chapter 5, I show how the ambivalent honor-group of the Spartan honor-lover relates to the decline of the city; in Chapter 6,

I have something to say about how the mutability of *philotimia* figures in the *Numa*. There are a number of contributions of this sort. This work also extends two important but still nascent trends in Plutarch scholarship: first, the recognition that Plutarch's *Lives* are arranged not only in "books" (the pair and its comparison) but across the books to constitute a "tale of two cities" (as Pelling (2010) puts it; see Chap. 2, n. 78 for further discussion); and second, the recognition that each "book" is a competition the reader is asked to judge (see Tatum (2010); for further discussion, Chap. 7, n. 17). I build on the first insight by stressing that the *Lives* are a tale of not only two but several cities; I suggest that the plurality of Greek cities is significant in the overall trajectory of "Greece" in the *Lives*, and I show how the Spartan *Lives* cohere with one another, to the point of constituting a *Life* all their own. I build on the second insight by linking the competition inherent in Plutarch's literary form to his psychology of statesmen and his depiction of the political worlds in which they move. Perhaps my most fundamental contribution to the specialist study of Plutarch, however, is to place Sparta, rather than Athens or Rome, at the center of Plutarch's enterprise. Plutarch's admiration for Lycurgus has, of course, been widely noted, but I believe I am the first to recognize Lycurgus as Plutarch's literary alter ego and to recognize the many similarities between Spartan politics and the structure of the *Parallel Lives*. This recognition has, I believe, significant bearing on our overall understanding of Plutarch's work.