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*Parallel Lives* – a Historical Lesson in Ethical Behavior

Plutarch, a Greek aristocrat and a writer by profession, was born in the middle of first century AD. During his life he produced over two hundred separate titles that focused mostly on moral issues. However, one of his major works, *Parallel Lives*, provides the readers with biographies of Greek and Roman historical figures and is largely based on information obtained from various historical documents, oral tradition, and knowledgeable contemporaries of the author. Plutarch's choice of material may lead the readers to believe that the goal of *Parallel Lives* was to give an accurate historical account of the lives of the famous statesmen and that the work can be safely used as a historical source. A careful analysis of the text, however, reveals that in his biographies such as those of Lycurgus and Solon, Plutarch focuses on character traits of the historical figures and provides the readers with numerous stories containing moral lessons. This suggests that his true purpose was not to provide an unbiased historical account of the lives of the past leaders but to analyze the character of important Greek and Roman historical figures and through real-life examples of their decisions that either lead to success or to failure educate the leaders of his own time in ethical behavior (Plutarch (Stadter Introduction), xi). Consequently, before using a particular piece of information in *Parallel Lives* as a historical source, the readers should examine the context of its presentation and assess the objectiveness of Plutarch. For example, Plutarch could have invented events to support the character development of the historical figures, interpreted an actual fact in a biased way that fit a particular trait he wanted to discuss, or presented only those events that fit the personality he selected for his statesman.

Plutarch demonstrates his focus on the character of the historical figures through open use of unreliable historical information for the sake of character development. For example, at the beginning of Lycurgus's biography, the author acknowledges that "there is nothing indisputable to be said about Lycurgus the legislator" and yet, he proceeds to examine his life, unsure about when the man lived, who his parents were, how he died, and even if he were just one man and not two (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 1). He writes about

Lycurgus because he could be credited with creation of “an actual and unrivalled system of government” that relies on “virtue and internal unanimity,” a system from which Plutarch’s contemporaries could learn proper ethical behavior (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 31). Later in the biography the author is “reluctant to attribute to Lycurgus a disgusting institution like the *krypteia*” even though the ancient sources suggest that he was responsible for its establishment (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 28). Plutarch bases “this judgment of his character on his equitability and fairness in other respects” (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 28). Thus, in order to present the character of Lycurgus in a consistent way to his readers, Plutarch picks out historical evidence that fits with Lycurgus’s “high-mindedness and justice” and rejects other sources (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 3). Similarly, in his biography of Solon, Plutarch includes an unreliable account of Solon’s encounter with Croesus. He explains his decision by claiming that “when a story is so famous and well attested and, more importantly, so much in keeping with Solon’s character and worthy of his self-assurance” that a chronological inconsistency is not a good enough reason to reject it as fiction (Plutarch, Solon, 27). Thus, in the biographies of Lycurgus and Solon, Plutarch is more concerned with character development of his historical figures than the historical accuracy of the information he presents.

Another clue that reveals the author’s focus on character development of Lycurgus and Solon is his inclusion of stories from history interpreted in a way that they highlight the moral values and personality traits of the historical figures and provide the readers with valuable lessons. For example, in the first story told in Lycurgus’s biography, Lycurgus is approached by his deceased brother’s wife who offers to kill her unborn child, an heir to the throne, if Lycurgus marries her. Plutarch reports that Lycurgus found the woman’s “immorality abhorrent” but went along with the idea until the king was born and then saved the child by taking him away from his mother (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 3). The author then points out that after this event, the people of Sparta become “very impressed by his [Lycurgus’s] high-mindedness and justice” (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 3). Consequently, this episode identifies the character of Lycurgus and allows the readers to learn from a real-life problem that was resolved by Lycurgus in a just manner. In another historical account, Lycurgus is chased out of the city square by the rich Spartans who are unhappy with his reforms and is eventually struck by a young

Spartan Alcander who knocks out his eye. Lycurgus, however, still confronts the crowd and is able to win it over. He then punishes Alcander by making him his servant with a goal of changing him “from being an insubordinate, badly behaved young man to a very well-mannered responsible adult” (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 11). Plutarch uses this story to emphasize Lycurgus’s “self-possession and high-mindedness” and to present his readers with another case study of a real-life problem and an appropriate solution (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 11). In the concluding story of Lycurgus’s biography, Lycurgus obtains a promise from the assembly of Spartans that they will live by his laws until he comes back from Delphi. He then leaves Sparta and decides to kill himself, so “the state would continue to be held in the highest honor” (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 29). Plutarch uses this episode to highlight Lycurgus’s honorable qualities and “perfection of his happiness” in death and to demonstrate to his readers that even death can be “an effective act of virtue” (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 29). The idea of death as an act of virtue is also mentioned in the biography of Solon, when Solon tells Croesus about some of the most happy men he knows --Tellus and Cleobis and Biton brothers. “Tellus had been a man of integrity, with distinguished sons to succeed him, who had lacked for none of life’s essentials while he was alive and had died a glorious death winning the prize for valour in defence of his homeland” (Plutarch, Solon, 27). Thus, like Lycurgus, he was able to die a happy man. Cleobis and Biton brothers were highly devoted to each other and their mother, so when their mother’s oxen was late they harnessed themselves instead and took her to the temple of Hera. After they “had performed their sacrifices and drunk their wine, they went to sleep and never got up in the morning, but were found to have capped their great glory with an easy and painless death” (Plutarch, Solon, 27). Thus, the two brothers also died happy and honorably. Consequently, these stories emphasize the wise character of Solon and teach the readers that people should strive to live virtuous and honorable lives up until they die, because they can only be considered happy and successful if they die happy and successful. In another story in Solon’s biography, Plutarch describes an assembly meeting during which Ariston suggests granting Pisistratus fifty club-bearers as bodyguards. Solon, however, sees through Pisistratus’s plea for protection and recognizes that he is attempting to gain power of the city. Consequently, he protests Ariston’s motion and attempts to convince the people to not assist Pisistratus. However,

when he realizes that the poor will continue to support Pisistratus and the rich will not speak against Pisistratus, he gives up and leaves the assembly, “remarking that he had more intelligence than the one party and more courage than the other” (Plutarch, Solon, 30). This episode provides further evidence of Solon’s cleverness and honesty, but since Solon gives up on the people, it presents the readers with a real-life problem but no definitive solution. Thus, Plutarch’s stories had different kinds of lessons for his audience; some stories had a suggested answer provided within them, while others provoked the readers to think of their own solutions. As a group, they served to emphasize the character of important historical figures and to educate the readers of *Parallel Lives*.

Plutarch’s inclusion of stories and unreliable material to stress character development has a great affect on the potential use of his work as a historical source. Since historical accuracy is not his first priority, he could have transferred some of the characteristics of Lycurgus’s and Solon’s Roman counterparts onto them in order to make the character comparisons between the two lives easier. He could have also invented certain events to support his points and left out events that failed to support his points. For example, in Lycurgus’s biography Plutarch supplies the readers with such random details as “they [Spartans] remembered something Lycurgus had said about long hair – that it increases the attractiveness of handsome men and the fearsomeness of ugly men” (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 22). This detail works well with Plutarch’s portrayal of Lycurgus as an intelligent ruler but it is unclear how Plutarch would know that Lycurgus used to say this. Therefore, it is likely that he is attributing common Lacedaemonian sayings to Lycurgus. Similarly, in Solon’s biography, the author includes a conversation between Solon and Thespis, a play writer, in which Solon asks “Aren’t you ashamed to tell such enormous lies in front of so many people?” (Plutarch, Solon, 29) This episode is consistent with Solon’s honest character and Plutarch uses it to emphasize Solon’s disposition to truth. However, it is again uncertain how Plutarch would collect such information and therefore, it is likely that the story was fabricated. Besides adding questionable and possibly invented stories, Plutarch probably leaves out contradicting information from his analysis of the historical figures. For example, the institution of krypteia plays no role in his character development of Lycurgus, but since the institution

was well-known Plutarch briefly mentions it in his text with an explanation of why he does not think it applies to Lycurgus. However, Plutarch could have been aware of other less famous details that also contradicted his analysis but have chosen not to include them in his work. Consequently, Plutarch's account of events is probably incomplete since it contains only those events which support the character development of his historical figures. Thus, Plutarch's text should not be completely trusted as historically correct even in relation to the character and contributions of the historical figures.

Another problem with Plutarch's focus on character development and not historical accuracy is his subjective interpretation of the historical sources. For example, to be able to compare the society created by Lycurgus to Plato's ideal systems, he describes all of the unorthodox Spartan practices in a positive light. Plutarch mentions how Spartan boys were taught "to be teased without getting annoyed" and claims that this resulted in a formation of a "particular feature of Laconian character: the ability to take a joke" (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 12). However, his reason behind inclusion of this supposedly positive characteristic is probably justification of a Laconian custom "to... condemn what was disgraceful" during assembly meetings (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 25). Although the author claims that the criticism was performed "in an easy and jocular manner" and was taken well by those criticized, one can speculate that he is not providing his audience with an objective interpretation of the custom (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 25). The experience could have been embarrassing and those criticized certainly could have become annoyed with the constant teasing they had to tolerate. In a different interpretation of the custom, Stadter claims that some Spartans committed suicide because of the social pressure put onto them by the assembly (Plutarch (Stadter Notes), 390). Another unusual custom that Plutarch discusses is boys sustaining themselves by stealing food from people's gardens. He interprets this as a learning experience that develops "their...bravery and cunning" but it could also be interpreted as savage and immoral conduct (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 17). Aristotle, for example, thought that Lycurgus turned boys into animals (Plutarch (Stadter Notes), 388). Thus, to support his argument of Lycurgus as a ruler who created "an actual and unrivalled system of government" based on virtue and internal unanimity, Plutarch had to interpret all the parts of the social system in a positive way (Plutarch, Lycurgus, 31). Consequently, these interpretations should be examined carefully and not

necessarily trusted as the reality of the Spartan social system. Plutarch also subjectively interprets Solon's laws to support Solon's wise and just character. For example, as a result of Solon's reforms, the common people "could attend the Assembly and act as jurors" (Plutarch, Solon, 18). This granted them power to resolve most disputes. Plutarch also suggests that Solon could have purposely written his laws "obscurely and ambiguously...so that they in a way were the masters of the laws" (Plutarch, Solon, 18). Plutarch seems to borrow these ideas from Aristotle but he does not include the last part of Aristotle's argument that "it is not likely that he was unclear for that reason, but rather because it is impossible to define what is best in general terms" (AthPol, 9). Thus, Plutarch wants to portray Solon as a wise and foreseeing ruler, who gave the people ultimate power and gives him too much credit. Consequently, one should approach Plutarch's arguments in the biographies carefully to make sure that they were not interpreted in a biased or misleading way to support the established character of a historical figure.

Thus, Plutarch's biographies in *Parallel Lives* should be primarily treated as lessons in ethical behavior and not as historical sources. They focus on the character of the past historical figures, and they aim to educate the leaders of Plutarch's time in ethical behavior. However, Plutarch's work could also be used as a historical source, if historical evidence is extracted through careful examination of the text and identification of possible biases, omissions, and fabrications.