

PLUTARCH

On Education

Plutarch (46 C.E.–120 C.E.) was born in Greece but taught philosophy in Rome and wrote widely on morality, literature, and history. He is known best for his biographies of Greeks and Romans, which he presented as parallel lives from which he drew moral lessons.

No Greek or Roman shaped Mediterranean culture in the way that Confucius influenced Chinese and East Asian culture. Nevertheless, Plutarch's interest in morality and education offers points of comparison

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with Confucius. In what ways was Plutarch's moral and educational philosophy similar to that of Confucius? In what ways was it different? What do those differences say about the differences between Roman and Chinese culture?

Thinking Historically

One way to draw out a comparison of two major thinkers like Plutarch and Confucius is to list the key concerns and to note the words used by each. You have already read, and we have already listed, some of Confucius's main concerns. You might compose a similar list for Plutarch noting also any key words you see repeated. How do these two lists compare?

Although Plutarch does not represent Roman or Greco-Roman thought as thoroughly as Confucius stands for China, his work was part of what Adshhead calls the classical *paedeta* (taught morality) that increased the cultural solidarity of elites. How might these ideas have helped Greek and Roman upper classes identify with their counterparts in the broader empire?

Adshhead also suggests that the "sound/meaning ratio" in Chinese (a high percentage of homophones, or sounds that could convey a number of different meanings) made Chinese less explicit than Greek, Latin, or other Indo-European languages. The wider range of phonemes (distinct sounds units) in Indo-European languages, according to Adshhead, tends to make Greek and Latin speakers more precise or blunt, less evasive or poetic. Does your reading of Plutarch and Confucius support this judgment? Compare Confucius and Plutarch to Plato or Thucydides (in Chapter 3). Whose writing is more syntagmatic (organized in a logical order of statements)?

1. THE COURSE that ought to be taken for the training of freeborn children, and the means whereby their manners may be rendered virtuous, will, with the reader's permission, be our present subject.

2. We should begin with their very procreation. I would therefore, in the first place, advise those who desire to become the parents of famous and eminent children, that they keep not company with all women that they light on; I mean such as harlots, or concubines. For such children as are blemished in their birth, either by the father's or the mother's side, are liable to be pursued, as long as they live, with the indelible infamy of their base extraction, . . .

[Discussion of birth and childhood follows.]

8. In brief therefore I say (and what I say may justly challenge the reputation of an oracle rather than of advice), that the one chief thing in that mat-

ter—which comprises the beginning, middle, and end of all—is good education and regular instruction; and that these two afford great help and assistance toward the attainment of virtue and felicity. For all other good things are but human and of small value, such as will hardly recompense the industry required to the getting of them. It is, indeed, a desirable thing to be well-descended; but the glory belongs to our ancestors. Riches are valuable; but they are the goods of Fortune, who frequently takes them from those that have them, and carries them to those that never so much as hoped for them. Yes, the greater they are, the fairer mark they are for those to aim at who design to make our bags their prize; I mean evil servants and accusers. But the weightiest consideration of all is, that riches may be enjoyed by the worst as well as the best of men. Glory is a thing deserving respect, but unstable; beauty is a prize that men fight to obtain, but, when obtained, it is of little continuance; health is a precious enjoyment, but easily impaired; strength is a thing desirable, but apt to be the prey of disease and old age. And, in general, let any man who values himself upon strength of body know that he makes a great mistake; for what indeed is any proportion of human strength, if compared to that of other animals, such as elephants and bulls and lions? But learning alone, of all things in our possession, is immortal and divine. And two things there are that are most peculiar to human nature, reason and speech; of which two, reason is the master of speech, and speech is the servant of reason, impregnable against all assaults of fortune, not to be taken away by false accusation, nor impaired by sickness, nor enfeebled by old age. For reason alone grows youthful by age; and time, which decays all other things before it carries them away with it, leaves learning alone behind. Whence the answer seems to me very remarkable, which Stilpo, a philosopher of Megara, gave to Demetrius, who, when he leveled that city to the ground and made the citizens slaves, asked Stilpo whether he had lost anything. Nothing, he said, for war cannot plunder virtue. To this saying that of Socrates also is very agreeable; who, when Gorgias (as I take it) asked him what his opinion was of the king of Persia, and whether he judged him happy, returned answer, that he could not tell what to think of him, because he knew not how he was furnished with virtue and learning—as judging human felicity to consist in those endowments, and not in those which are subject to fortune. . . .

11. In the next place, the exercise of the body must not be neglected; but children must be sent to schools of gymnastics, where they may have sufficient employment that way also. This will conduce partly to a more handsome carriage, and partly to the improvement of their strength. For the foundation of a vigorous old age is a good constitution of the body in childhood. Wherefore, as it is expedient to provide those things in fair weather which may be useful to the mariners in a storm, so is it to keep good order and govern ourselves by rules of temperance in youth, as the best provision we can lay in for age. Yet must they husband their strength, so as not to become dried up (as it were) and destitute of strength to follow their studies. For, according to Plato, sleep and weariness are enemies to the arts.

But why do I stand so long on these things? I hasten to speak of that which is of the greatest importance, even beyond all that has been spoken of; namely, I would have boys trained for the contests of wars by practice in the throwing of darts, shooting of arrows, and hunting of wild beasts. For we must remember in war the goods of the conquered are proposed as rewards to the conquerors. But war does not agree with a delicate habit of body, used only to the shade; for even one lean soldier that has been used to military exercises shall overthrow whole troops of mere wrestlers who know nothing of war. But, somebody may say, while you profess to give precepts for the education of all free-born children, why do you carry the matter so as to seem only to accommodate those precepts to the rich, and neglect to suit them also to the children of poor men and plebeians? To which objection it is no difficult thing to reply. For it is my desire that all children whatsoever may partake of the benefit of education alike; but if yet any persons, by reason of the narrowness of their estates, cannot make use of my precepts, let them not blame me that give them for Fortune, which disabled them from making the advantage by them they otherwise might. Though even poor men must use their utmost endeavor to give their children the best education; or, if they cannot, they must bestow upon them the best that their abilities will reach. Thus much I thought fit here to insert in the body of my discourse, that I might the better be enabled to annex what I have yet to add concerning the right training of children. . . .

17. And in sum, it is necessary to restrain young men from the conversation of debauched persons, lest they take infection from their evil examples. This was taught by Pythagoras in certain enigmatical sentences, which I shall here relate and expound, as being greatly useful to further virtuous inclinations. Such are these: *Taste not of fish that have black tails;* that is, converse not with men that are smutted with vicious qualities. *Stride not over the beam of the scales;* wherein he teaches us the regard we ought to have for justice, so as not to go beyond its measures. *Sit not on a phoenix,* wherein he forbids sloth, and requires us to take care to provide ourselves with the necessities of life. *Do not strike hands with every man;* he means we ought not to be over hasty to make acquaintances or friendships with others. *Wear not a tight string;* that is, we are to labor after a free and independent way of living, and to submit to no fetters. *Stir not up the fire with a sword;* signifying that we ought not to provoke a man more when he is angry already (since this is a most unseemly act), but we should rather comply with him while his passion is in its heat. *Eat not your heart;* which forbids to afflict our souls, and waste them with vexatious cares. *Abstain from beans;* that is, keep out of public offices, for anciently the choice of the officers of state was made by beans. *Put not food in a chamber-pot;* wherein he declares that elegant discourse ought not to be put into an impure mind; for discourse is the food of the mind, which is rendered unclean by the foulness of the man who receives it. *When men are arrived at the goal, they should not turn back;* that is, those who are near

the end of their days, and see the period of their lives approaching, ought to entertain it contentedly, and not to be grieved at it. . . .

18. These counsels which I have now given are of great worth and importance; what I have now to add touches certain allowances that are to be made to human nature. Again, therefore, I would not have fathers of an over-rigid and harsh temper, but so mild as to forgive some slips of youth, remembering that they themselves were once young. . . .

I will add a few words more, and put an end to these advices. The chief thing that fathers are to look to is that they themselves become effectual examples to their children, by doing all those things which belong to them and avoiding all vicious practices, which in their lives, as in a glass, their children may see enough to give them an aversion to all ill words and actions. For those that chide children for such faults as they themselves fall into unconsciously accuse themselves, under their children's names. And if they are altogether vicious in their own lives, they lose the right of reproaching their very servants, and much more do they forfeit it towards their sons. Yes, what is more than that, they make themselves even counsellors and instructors to them in wickedness. For where old men are impudent, there of necessity must the young men be so too. Wherefore we are to apply our minds to all such practices as may conduce to the good breeding of our children. And here we may take example from Eurydice of Hierapolis, who, although she was an Illyrian, and so thrice a barbarian, yet applied herself to learning when she was well advanced in years, that she might teach her children. Her love towards her children appears evidently in this Epigram of hers, which she dedicated to the Muses:

Eurydice to the Muses here doth raise

This monument, her honest love to praise;

Who her grown sons that she might scholars breed,

Then well in years, herself first learned to read.

And thus have I finished the precepts which I designed to give concerning this subject. But that they should all be followed by any one reader is rather, I fear, to be wished than hoped. And to follow the greater part of them, though it may not be impossible to human nature, yet will need a concurrence of more than ordinary diligence joined with good fortune.