

# THE LIFE OF THE PHILOSOPHER: TESTIMONY OF PLUTARCH AND PORPHYRY

*LA VIDA DEL FILÓSOFO: TESTIMONIO DE PLUTARCO Y PORFIRIO*

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## RESUMEN    ABSTRACT

Este artículo explora en los testimonios de Plutarco y Porfirio, el rol y función del filósofo cuyo modo de vida negocia la liberación del rango de los sentidos. Esto incluye una investigación en su dieta y sacrificio cuya culminación es la re-evaluación de su demarcación de las masas.

The paper explores on the testimony of Plutarch and Porphyry, the role and function of the philosopher whose mode of life negotiates liberation from the range of the senses. This includes an investigation into his diet and sacrifice, the culmination of which is the re-assessment of his demarcation from the masses.

## PALABRAS CLAVE    KEY WORDS

Plutarco, Porfirio, vegetarianismo, sacrificio sin sangre, la buena vida.

Plutarch, Porphyry, vegetarianism, bloodless sacrifice, the good life.

The pagan holy man's way of living demarcates him from the laity in respect of his conduct and vision.<sup>1</sup> Insight in to the discipline of philosophy within perspectives pertaining to a way of life, not necessary restricted within limits of personal holiness, has driven Pierre Hadot to survey the role and function of the sage by appreciating him as a living concrete model.<sup>2</sup> Hadot's focus is on Socrates whose representation in Greek philosophy inspires the application of spiritual exercises for the perfection of intellectual and moral training throwing much light on his assertion that "philosophy was a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of living." (Hadot 265)<sup>3</sup>

The logic behind Hadot's position is that philosophy is a way of living that separates a person from others but it does not fulfill the requirements in full length for the understanding of the philosopher's life within the wider frame of a *bios*. This void will be filled with the testimony of Plutarch and Porphyry.

The study of the wise man in the form of the combination of complete philosopher and active citizen projects in Plutarch's demonstration of Socrates who in Riley's view stands midway between a philosophical topic typical of the 'Moralia' and an active historical narrative from the 'Lives'. (Riley 273) Regrettably, the focus of current Plutarchean scholarship is more on character portrayal of significant social figures where the character of Socrates is often ranked superior among others who dominate the scene and Plutarch is driven to emphasize this position when he declares that "abstention from pleasure in what is allowed is a training of the soul to resist what is forbidden". (Ibid. 15.585 a-b=7.579c-d 15.584 d-e 15.585 b-c c-d) (Duff 159) (Mounard 339)

Socrates is identified as the ideal of the philosophic life and accommodates a domain illuminated by the emanations of the daemons (Ibid. 20.589b-

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<sup>1</sup> Brown (80) traces the holy man "popularity as a product of the oppression and conflict that the social historian often ends to see as a blatant feature of east Roman society"; also his power in varied proportions (81-7), his role as peace maker (89-0), athlete (94), social status (91), intimacy with god (94); his rise is identified with what Plutarch writes of the decline of oracles. (99-00)

<sup>2</sup> Davidson notices Hadot's study to be of existential value not only a moral one (476) and that: "what Hadot has done beyond his influence on any particular thinkers is to open up dimensions of ancient philosophy we have typically overlooked or forgotten. Thus he has re-discovered and re-conceptualized the significance of ancient philosophy for our present moment in philosophy's unfolding history". (482)

<sup>3</sup> Hadot draws from standard academia for his treatment of Socrates: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Gaiser, Bohm, Bertram, Hildbrant, Spiegelberg, Lausberg (171-73); (Davidson 476).

c), the existence and assistance of the personal daemon (Ibid. 24.593 d-f) where every soul understands the irrational and the unintelligent. (Ibid. 22.591d-e e-f 22.592b-d) (Opsomer 197-203) (Jones) (Brenk 27-49)

For Porphyry Socrates represents the same tenor in *De Abstinencia* (3.1) but he cannot be identified as completely 'good'. (3.8) He is neither a vegetarian (1.15 3.26) nor does he possess human consideration for animals (3.22) although he does display some concern for them as he used to swear by animals. (3.16) As such, Socrates does not represent habits, which in the opinion of Porphyry and for that matter what Plutarch strives in the 'Moralia' to demonstrate, as central for the good life – the practice of vegetarianism and the possession of humane consideration for all life forms – although Plutarch traces absence of sexual lust in his response to Alcibiades' infatuation and the appreciation of a life free from indulgence in material pleasures as outstanding. (Duff 40) (Nikolaidis 275-88) Applied to Porphyry's ascetic mold it loses substance. (Clark, *Augustine's Porphyry* 127) (Clark, *Fattening the*)

The Socratic ideal of renunciation in *De Genio*, central to virtuous conduct expands from its Middle Platonic context in to a different frame in Neoplatonism when Porphyry's description of his mentor, Plotinus, whose personal details bear a degree of living in accordance to a program of discarding the corporeal. For example, his birthday and ancestry (*Vitae Plotini*, 2) except for a few childhood memories (3) are concealed under cover of 'ashamed of being in the body' (1) which belongs to a broader program of "striving to give back to the Divine in himself to the Divine in All." (2) The culmination of his habitual indulgence towards approaching the Supreme (9) though he is under the impression that "it is for those Beings (ancestors or spirits) to come (to him) not for him to go to them," a claim that may have risen with his possession of a God for a personal daemon. (10) His desire for the re-establishment of the Platonic tradition in the form of the Platonopolis (12) despite his love of following his own tradition (12) though subject to failure demarcates him from the host of contemporaries driven to seek the beauty of philosophical endeavor (3 7 9 14-5 20) inspires Porphyry himself to look upon him as a model (20-1) even at the point when he attempts suicide. (11) The representation of a separate way of living reaches its zenith at the moment of his death, even with an unusual occurrence (2) followed by the declaration of Apollo:

Spirit man once, but now the diviner lot of a spirit as the bond of human necessity has been loosed for you and strong in heart, you swam swiftly from the roaring surge of the body to that coast where the stream flows strong, far apart from the crowd of the wicked, there to set your step firm in the easy path of the pure soul, where the splendor of God shines around you and the divine law abides in purity far from lawlessness, wickedness, O blessed one, you have borne so many contests and now move among the holy spirits crowned with mighty life. (22)

Porphyry represents Plotinus as one who 'refuses' medicaments containing substances from wild beasts and reptiles and did not approve the consumption of meat of animals reared for the table. (2) His non-violence is questionable, given the fact that he may not have practiced what Porphyry defines in *De Abstinencia* as total vegetarianism except perhaps for hygienic purposes. (2) There is discrepancy in Plotinus' type of non-violence since once he encourages torture of a man who stole a necklace even though he sensed that he was the thief. (11) But could one who loved all encourage violence to anybody? Still, Porphyry ensures that he never had an enemy except Olympus whose plans against Plotinus were based on jealousy. (10) True enough, he lives for others (as well as for himself) (8) enjoying the reputation of being guardian of the young as well their progenitor's consolation of their being in 'holy hands'. (9) Where his association with women is concerned he has no discomfort in living in the same house with such women whose intentions are philosophic, as Gemina and Amphiclea (9) although his conduct seems to be a little awkward when his blushful reaction at the sight of Origen is covered by his declaration that "the zest dies down when the speaker feels that his hearers have nothing to learn from him". (14) His reaction to Diophanes' claim of sexual intimacy between master and pupil is expressed in his exclamation to Porphyry: "so strike and be a light to men," a position similar to his reaction to Porphyry's essay on Sacred Marriage. (15) There is nothing to confirm apart from this incidence that sexual attraction has any significant influence on him. It may have attributed to Porphyry's type of celibacy which drives him to a ten month old marriage with the Jewish widow, Marcella, which to him is a 'gift from heaven' (*Ad Marcellam*, 3), his reasons for marriage being the propitiation of gods of generation (2) and protection of Marcella who conceived an attraction suitable for 'true philosophy'. (3)

Separation from externals, this being the way Porphyry addresses this issue in *De Abstinentia* (external: 1.28, 2.52; exoteric discipline: 1.30; external tumult: 1.34; external concerns: 1.54; external calamity: 1.33) (*Ad Marcellam*, 5 6-8 14 28-0 33) is a process that inspires the philosophic life when men could become 'truly rich' (1.54); 'live truly' (1.31); 'return to what is truly theirs' (ours) and to the 'truly existing thing' (1.29-0) with the love of the true being (1.33) which is literally the only kind of 'true salvation' known to Porphyry forming the true philosopher (*Ad Marcellam*, 27) who himself honors truth and the true good. (5) He is after all the priest of the God and loved by Him (2.49), constantly accompanied by Him (19-0) and in this sense, he finally might as well become himself a God. (15) (*De Abstinentia*, 1.54) He toils to accomplish virtues like freedom from sloth and torpor which cause idle speech and lies. (1.49 = 1.27-8) His one concern is attainment of virtue. (*Ad Marcellam*, 12) The soul's ascent depends on virtue (16) but 'neglecting virtue and wisdom and mere reasoning faith without right living does not make it possible to attain to God'. (23) One ought to live according to divine laws (26), eliminate wrong conceptions of God (21-3), cultivate self-mastery (29), cultivate faith, truth, love, hope (24) and eventually casting away the body. (34) Non-use of wrong words and non-engagement in wrong deeds (8 12 14-5 17) following Plato's track to facilitate the journey from the sensibles to the intelligible (10) is no easy venture but in reality a contest. (5-8 9 = 1.56) The education of the man who abides by such a way of living consists not in absorbing knowledge but in casting off affections of the soul (9) the culmination of which will be its application to those who desire such knowledge. (2.61) Education, for Plutarch, however assumes the form of adoption of Hellenic culture which cast major Roman figures in to this mold who are not necessarily versed in philosophy but whose social program is in harmony with the welfare of the Roman public in mind. (Gill 469-87) (Bebekar 193-203) (Swain 127-8)

The training of the philosopher within the mold of asceticism begins with discarding sensory pleasures, a project devoted to the elimination of the energization of the irrational part of the soul. It gives rise to a condition exemplified by the Essenes who are "averse to pleasures conceiving them to be vicious but they are of opinion that continence and not yielding to the passions constitute virtue." (4.11) Deliverance from corruption, in Porphyry's *schema* is fundamental for the philosophic type of life (*Ad Marcellam*, 33) and if possible casting away the body not just in parts but perhaps even go to the extent of dying for God. (34) Cultivation of all that is good is a vital means of being good to all men. (35 = 3.20)

Purity for Plutarch from the point of view of righteousness is to be self-sufficient and this is not a 'quibble of Orpheus'. (*Septem Sapientiam*, 16.159 b-c c-d) This self-sufficiency dominates Plutarch's arguments regarding maintenance of purity free from gluttony (*De Tuenda*, 6.124 e-f) more so, gluttony and the lust to kill (*De Esu*, 2.997a-d) which is totally deranging, disturbing and foreign to nature. (*De Tuenda*, 7.125 c-d e-f 18.131f-132b) What Plutarch laments is the transformation from previously 'lawful desires' when men depended on vegetable produce (*De Esu*, 1.2.993f-994b) to 'unnatural and anti-social pleasures' (*De Esu*, 1.2.993 d-e = *Vice and*, 2.101a-b) which are not in tune with human nature (*De Esu*, 1.5.995 a-b b-c 1.6.995 d-e e-f 7.996a-b) leading to the conclusion that "he who tortures a living creature is no worse than he who slaughters it outright." (1.7.996 b-c) Dismissing the mythical crimes of cannibalism (1.7.996 b-c 2.2.997 e-f) but accepting the program initiated by Pythagoras and the Pythagorean Empedocles whose precepts were 'law' for the ancient Greeks (2.3.998f 4.999a) Plutarch is more concerned with who exactly was responsible for this drastic social transition. It was the tyrants who began by killing the 'worst of sychophants' like Niceratus, Theramena, Polemarchus (2.4.998 b-c) which gradually cleared ground to kill wild and harmful animals like bird and fish and expanded to the "laboring ox, well-behaved sheep and house-warding cock" the reason for which was entertainment of guests, celebration of marriage, consorts with friends and war. (c-d)

Neither Plutarch nor Porphyry specifically claims a total abstinence from killing animals or eating their flesh where conditions require it. But meat consumption obstructs what in their opinion is viewed as the good life and the soul's eventual return to its lawful origin. They both address the issue of philosophy as the prime motive in this program which is virtually the primary concern of the man whose way of living transcends that of the masses. Philosophy is more a passion than anything else (*Vitae Pythagorae*, 46 = *Vitae Plotini*, 3) where stress is laid on the fulfillment of the acquisition of truth. (*Vitae Pythagorae*, 41 = *Vitae Plotini*, 13-8)

Plutarch professes knowledge of both a tradition of bloodless sacrifice (*Apophthegmata Romana*, 5.15.267 c-d) and a tradition which did not approve the violation of a maiden (at the shrine of Diana). (3.264 c-d) He responds to the popularity of blood sacrifice (3.52.217 a-b 3.68.280 b-c) and the use of wine during sacrifice (3.45.275 e-f) when meat consumption was so common that even a public meat market was built by Marcellus. (3.54.e-f) Plutarch's defense of vegetarianism, however,

is grounded on a wider and broader frame where animal intelligence is appreciated as far better than that of the humans (*Chance*, 3.98c-d) *Bruta Animalia* is replete. (4.987 d-e 5.989 a-b 4.987 e-f 4.988 b-c 6.998 e-f 7.990 f-8.991b 9.992 d-e 6.989 c-f) Their 'native virtue' makes it possible to train them for the sake of utility. (9.992b-c c-d) In contrast, men are gluttons (8.991 b-c) for they eat simply everything (8.991c-d) and commit sexual acts with even animals (8.990 e-f) so that men are the ones who ought to be called beasts not animals because their cruelty exceeds that of savage serpents, panther and lion. (8.99b-c) Some animals are revered. (*Isis et Osiris*, 5.70.379 d-e) Plutarch downright denies that gods are metamorphosized as animals. (5.71.379f-380b)

Porphyry's quest for a universal mode of salvation was foremost in his philosophical carrier for which he applied his knowledge of Indians and Chaldeans (*De Civitate*, 10.32) and interaction with Iamblichus in the form of the *Letter to Anebo*. The eminent polymath declares his preference for true philosophy (*Ad Marcellam*, 3-8) which embodies the 'proper mode of life' and 'guidance' (3) being the 'only true refuge'. (5) Access to the ascent to the gods remains in philosophy yet this ascent is 'steep and rough' (fr. 323 = *Ad Marcellam*, 5-12) (*Cult Images*, fr.10 = *Preparatio Evangelica*, 3.11.45-3.20) the culmination of which encapsulates the last words of Plotinus: "try to bring back the god in you to the Divine in the All." (*Vitae Plotini*, 2)

The 'true philosopher' following nature and not vain opinions is self-sufficient in all things (*Ad Marcellam*, 27) extends in his 'naked' emptiness all throughout his life (29-31) and finally approaches Him in that condition (*De Abstinencia*, 1.31-33) and thus assumes the condition of "teacher, savior, guardian, leader, nurse (*Ad Marcellam*, 26 = *Vitae Plotini*, 9 = *Vitae Pythagorae*, 18 19 33 = *De Abstinencia*, 2.61) clearing ground for the love of mankind (*Ad Marcellam*, 35 = *De Abstinencia*, 3.26-27 = *Vitae Pythagorae*, 30 = *Vitae Plotini*, 9) removal of ignorance, wickedness and passions (*Ad Marcellam*, 13-4 25 27-9 34) and liberation from the state of being bound in chains (*Ad Marcellam*, 33 = fr.297-298 (*De Regressu*) ascribe to the good life (*Ad Marcellam*, 14-7) for then only will he who practices philosophy will be as worthy as a god the representation of whom is idealized in Plotinus who rises above humankind after death. (*Vitae Plotini*, 22-3 = *Ad Marcellam*, 15-6 24 32) The link between right action and Porphyry's conception of salvation is clear. Elizabeth DePalma's views are truly enlightening in this regard:

Our Protestantized society tends to view souls as being either deserving or unworthy of salvation, and all-or-nothing status. Third-century Platonists, however, thought that a range of activities positioned the soul, depending on its condition, at different levels within the celestial spheres, even to union with transcendent divinity, or *henosis theōi*. Philosophers were especially interested in divine union which, according to Porphyry, might allow their souls to break out of the cycle of metempsychosis. Activities were salvific if they improved the condition of the soul; for ordinary persons certain activities would perhaps allow their souls to achieve *henosis theōi* in a future life. (522-3)

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