THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

PLUTARCH

(translated by Donald Russell)

Montaigne professed great admiration for this work: "There are works of Plutarch's in which he forgets his theme, in which the treatment of his subject is found only incidentally, quite smothered in foreign matter. See his movements in 'The Daemon of Socrates.' Lord, what beauty there is in these lusty sallies and this variation, and more so the more casual and accidental they seem" (Complete Essays [1958], 761). But like with his own writing, Montaigne understands that there is a key focus: "the whole is about Epaminondas."

We read Plutarch not only for how the discussion of how Socrates' "admonitory voice" or daimon might relate to Jaynes, but also for how the work explores the relation of thought to action and proposes (very much against our notion of freedom today) that rather than spontaneous release, it takes highly repetitive and intensive training to become truly free—we will be relating this to the readings from Plato and and the Gita.

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Archedemus begs Caphisias to tell the story of the revolt that freed Thebes from Spartan occupation in 379 BCE and restored democracy. The conspirators begin by meeting at the house of Simmias (who witnessed Socrates' death).

I remember, Caphisias, once hearing a painter use an apt simile to describe people who look at pictures. He said that a layman who had no knowledge of the art was like a man giving a general salutation to a crowd of people, whereas the sophisticated connoisseur was more like the man who greets everyone he meets individually. He was right. The layman has only a general, inexact view of the work of art, while the connoisseur's separate examination of every detail allows nothing, whether good or bad, to pass unobserved or uncommented. It is much the same, I suspect, with real events. For the lazy-minded, it suffices to learn the basic facts and the outcome; but the lover of honour and beauty who views the masterpieces of that greatest of arts, virtue, takes greater pleasure in the detail. Since the issue depends on fortune, while the motivation and execution do not, it is in these that the student can perceive the struggle of virtue with circumstance, or the play of intelligent daring in the face of danger, when reason joins forces with the emotions of the moment. You will, I hope, regard us as students of this kind, and so tell us the story of the whole action from the beginning,

CAPHISIAS

My dear Archedemus, the very fact that your goodwill towards us makes you so anxious to hear what happened would itself have obliged me to come to Athens just to tell it all to you, and to put this, as Pindar says, 'above all business'.[1]