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Plutarch’s thoughts about happiness
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Abstract

Plutarch has much to say about happiness but, as far as we know, he never devoted an essay to this subject. His conception of happiness is built on the Aristotelian principle of the golden mean (μεσότης) implying that he repudiated the extreme doctrines of Stoics and Epicureans. Plutarch emphasizes the importance of the emotions for a happy life. His conclusions about the factors of happiness have been verified by modem research in psychology, sociology and medicine.

Introduction

Among Plutarch’s about 125 extant works we find none devoted precisely to happiness. Neither is there any title among the 227 of the Lamprias catalogue that would indicate such a theme. This is rather striking, considering that the texts of the Moralia extend over a very vast scope of subjects. At least in the Quaestiones convivales, where Plutarch most clearly displays his capacity of polyhistor, it would indeed be very likely to find a discussion on such an interesting and important subject.

The fact that Plutarch, as far as we know, did not hit on the idea of writing an essay Περί ευδαιμονίας or the like is particularly strange, considering that he, throughout his writings displays his profound interest in psychological issues of different kinds. We may also assume that he, in his teachings at his private academy at Chaeronea, committed himself to the amelioration of the character of his listeners partly in order that they might lead a more happy life.

In the lack of a monograph on this issue we have to search for thoughts about happiness throughout his writings and try to get a picture of his views. Plutarch probably never tried to present any definition of the concept. In difference to the Stoics or the Epicureans he does not recognize happiness as a stereotyped state of mind, such as the Stoic απάθεια or the Epicurean αταραξία. He regards their concepts of happiness and the principles of these as unnatural and impossible to realize in practical life. His decided repudiation of these sects is to be seen in the large number of polemic writings leveled against them.


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