How to deal with the philosophical tradition?
Some general rules in Plutarch’s anti-Epicurean treatises*
by
Geert Roskam
K.U. Leuven
Geert.Roskam@arts.kuleuven.be

Abstract
In this contribution, Plutarch’s rules for a good philosophical polemic, and the way in which he himself uses them in his anti-Epicurean treatises, are examined. First of all, a good philosophical discussion presupposes in Plutarch’s view the fulfilment of several intellectual conditions, such as basic respect for the rules of logical reasoning and thorough knowledge of the matter under discussion. Secondly, these intellectual rules are completed by a set of moral demands: the whole discussion should be entirely free from the pernicious influence of the passions.

In his anti-Epicurean polemics, Plutarch shows how Colotes, and his master Epicurus, often break these intellectual and moral rules. The question remains, however, whether Plutarch himself observes his own rules in his attack on Epicurean philosophy. A thorough analysis shows that he often indeed faithfully observes his own intellectual and moral demands, but that, in spite of his attempt to set a good example, his polemical attacks are occasionally also at odds with his own rules.

Key-Words: Plutarch, Moralia, Colotes, Philosophical polemics.

1. Plutarch’s rules for a good philosophical polemic

In the works of Plutarch of Chaeronea, especially in his anti-Epicurean treatises Adversus Colotem and Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum (henceforward: Non posse), much information about ethical rules for a good polemic can be found. Plutarch never elaborated a systematic ethics of philosophical polemics, to be sure, but adopted a fairly coherent series of clear criteria, the relevance and importance of which

* A much more extensive version of this paper, which was read at a conference of the Réseau thématique Plutarque in Paris (September 13-14, 2007), has meanwhile appeared in LEC76 (2008), 197-231.

Ploutarchos, n.s., 8 (2010/2011) 133-146 ISSN 0258-655X