Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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Abstract

Although the words φιλανθρωπία and φιλάνθρωπος are pivotal terms of his ethical vocabulary, Plutarch often attaches to these words meanings and nuances that appear to be ethically indifferent or neutral. One of these meanings is the sociability-nuance of philanthropia, which seems to describe all sorts of refined modes of behaviour such as courtesy, affability, tactfulness, friendliness, hospitality and the like. Plutarch appreciates and encourages these aspects of refined conduct (mainly in the Moralia), for he believes that they conduce to good human relations and promote social harmony. Yet, though some of his heroes (e.g., Phokion, Cato, Perikles) appear to be rather unsociable, Plutarch, far from finding any fault with them, explicitly or implicitly justifies and even approves of their sternness and austerity. Sometimes because he is aware that good manners and sociability, especially in the domain of politics, may be a deceptive façade that often conceals crude ambition or devious schemes and machinations; other times because he bows to the hero’s moral excellence, which, under certain circumstances, seems to be somehow incompatible with the usual manifestations of sociability.

According to Diogenes Laertios, Plato distinguished three kinds of philanthropia: a) by way of salutations, i.e. by addressing everyone you meet on the street and shaking hands with them, b) by way of helping everyone in need, and c) by way of keeping an open house and offering dinner–parties. In other words, philanthropia is manifested through salutations, through conferring benefits, and through offering dinners and promoting social intercourse. Nobody recognizes Plato in this description, of course, since the four occurrences of the words φιλανθρωπία and φιλάνθρωπος in the Platonic corpus convey only the literal meaning of the words (love and lover of mankind), which at most could be taken to underlie the second kind in Laertios’ passage. Plutarch would also have difficulty, I think, in associating Plato with the three kinds of philanthropia above, but for him Laertios’ description would have

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1 D. L. 3.98: Τῆς φιλανθρωπίας ἐστὶν εἴδη τρία· ἐν μὲν διὰ τῆς προσηγορίας γινόμενον, ὅποι ἐν οἷς τινες τὸν ἐντυχόντα πάντα προσαγορεύουσι καὶ τὴν δεξίαν εμβάλλοντες χαιρετίζουσιν. ἄλλο εἴδος, ὅταν τις βοηθητικός ἢ παντὶ τῷ ἀτυχοῦντι ἐμβάλλει, ἐτερον εἴδος ἐστὶ τῆς φιλανθρωπίας ἐν ὅποιοις ἀλλοιοδειπνισταί εἰσί. τῆς ἀρα φιλανθρωπίας τὸ μὲν ἐστι διὰ τοῦ προσαγορεύειν, τὸ δὲ διὰ τοῦ εὐεργετεῖν, τὸ δὲ διὰ τοῦ ἐστιαν καὶ φιλοσυνουσιαζεῖν. The above categorization is part of the Διαιρέσεις (Divisiones), the last section of D. L., book 3 (§§ 80-109), sometime attributed to Aristotle (see V. Rose, 1971, p. 677).