

Disentangling Family and State: Plutarch's Reception of Plato's *Republic* on Marriage

Plutarch begins *Coniugalia Praecepta* 20 (henceforth *CP*) with a paraphrase from Plato's *Republic*: "Plato asserts that happy and blessed is the city in which they hear people saying 'mine and not-mine' the least, since the citizens treat objects worthy of serious use in common as much as possible" (*Mor.* 140e). Plutarch uses this reference to establish the principle that husband and wife ought to share their property totally. At first glance, it appears that Plutarch is straightforwardly using the Platonic principle of the guardians' common property to ground his authority (cf. Goessler 1999, 103), but a deeper investigation yields a more complicated picture. Never in the *Coniugalia Praecepta*, a treatise on marriage, does Plutarch directly address the second radical "wave" of Plato's *Republic*, in which Socrates theorizes that marriage, procreation, and child-raising be altered from monogamy to a eugenic program of breeding and holding children in common. Since Plutarch was an avid student of Plato, he must have known about these passages, and yet he never directly addresses them. However, the quotation from the *Republic* that Plutarch uses in *CP* 20 is found at the conclusion of the second radical wave, as a generalizing principle of common property that is applied to wives and children. In this paper, I argue that this Platonic quotation and the section of the *Coniugalia Praecepta* in which it is found constitutes Plutarch's oblique response to the radicalization of marriage in the *Republic*.

Plutarch clearly has the full context of the *Republic* passage in mind as shown by the rest of *CP* 20, which pulls images from the same section of *Republic*. He uses imagery of husband and wife sharing a common body, saying, "just as doctors say that the blows of the left limbs carry over the sensation in the right limbs, thus the wife sympathizes with the husband's concerns, and the husband with his wife's" (140e). This comparison to a body is the exact same type of comparison that Plato makes in the corresponding passage of the *Republic*, where he

likens the citizens of a city to parts of a body (462c–d). Furthermore, Plutarch argues that in the same way children are shared between spouses, property should be shared as well (140f). This sharing of both property and offspring just is what Plato is investigating in the *Republic* V, though with a radically different result.

Plutarch's references to this section of the *Republic* allow him to address Plato's radical modifications of marriage. While Plato is attempting to take the strong bonds of marriage and family and apply them to the relationship between citizens, Plutarch separates them by arguing that what applies to citizens applies "much more"—πολὺ μᾶλλον—in the case of marriage. Thus he undoes Plato's threefold plan to bind the citizens through common property, common offspring, and the image of a common body. Plutarch returns these radical bonds to their traditional positions in marriage and family, in a way consistent with his other uses of this section of the *Republic*: in the *Amatorius* he argues that the image of a common body applies to lovers and in *On Brotherly Love*, he argues that if citizens should share things in common, then *a fortiori* brothers should do so as well. In these three uses of the *Republic*, Plutarch applies the links of the weaker bond (that between citizens) to the stronger relationship (that between lovers or brothers), in a reversal of Plato's attempts to build a familial bond between citizens of the city. Plutarch does not contradict Platonism directly in order to preserve his favored school of thought from criticism, but he subtly corrects what he regards as failures of the *Republic*. This paper contributes to work by other scholars to analyze Plutarch's modification of Plato, which has especially focused on the *Lives* (Bonazzi 2020, Pelling 2014). Plutarch uses Plato's writings to achieve his own goals in describing marriage, despite and because of Plato's contrary opinions.

Works Cited

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