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# *Plutarch's* How to Profit by One's Enemies*:* *Transforming Conflict into Virtue in the Greek Tradition of War and Peace**

[Plutarco, *Como Retirar Benefício dos Inimigos*: Transformar o Conflito em Virtude na Tradição Grega de Guerra e Paz]

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**Abstract**

This paper explores Plutarch's *How to Profit by One's Enemies* as a moral reimagining of conflict within the ancient Greek tradition. Rejecting a simplistic opposition between war and peace, Plutarch presents enmity as a valuable force for ethical self-cultivation and civic discipline. Drawing on historical and literary *exempla*, he argues that enemies can serve as mirrors for self-awareness, motivating individuals to refine their conduct and overcome vice. Moral victory, in this framework, lies not in revenge but in surpassing one's adversary in virtue. This reading is deepened through comparative analysis with *How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend* and *On Having Too Many Friends*, where false concord and superficial alliances prove more corrupting than honest opposition. Together, these treatises form a coherent philosophical program in which personal and political peace emerges not from eliminating conflict, but from mastering and transforming it through reason and character.

**Key-words:** Plutarch, Conflict and virtue, Moral philosophy, friendship, War and peace.

**Resumo**

Este artigo aborda a obra de Plutarco *Como Retirar Benefício dos Inimigos*, enquanto reinvenção moral do conflito na tradição grega antiga. Ao rejeitar uma oposição simplista entre guerra e paz, Plutarco apresenta a inimizade como uma força valiosa no caminho para o aperfeiçoamento ético e para a disciplina cívica. Baseando-se em exemplos históricos e literários, argumenta que os inimigos podem servir como espelhos para a autoconsciência, motivando os indivíduos a refinar a conduta e a superar vícios. A vitória moral, neste quadro, não reside na vingança, mas em superar o adversário no campo da virtude. Esta leitura é aprofundada através de uma análise comparativa com os opúsculos *Como Distinguir um Adulador de um Amigo* e *Acerca do Número Excessivo de Amigos,* nos quais a falsa consonância e as alianças superficiais se revelam mais corruptoras do que a oposição honesta. Em conjunto, estes tratados formam um programa filosófico coerente em que a paz pessoal e política não surge da eliminação do conflito, mas do seu domínio e transformação através da razão e do caráter.

**Palavras-cave:** Plutarco, Conflito e virtude: filosofia moral, Amizade, Guerra e paz.

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## 1. *Introduction: Rethinking Conflict in the Greek Ethical Tradition*

The concept of war and peace in ancient Greek thought was never confined to battlefield dynamics alone. From Homeric epics to classical historiography and philosophical ethics, conflict was seen as a defining force of human life. It could elevate men to heroic heights or reduce them to barbarism. Clearly, this is not the time to address such a complex issue in depth or attempt to summarise the current state of research on this topic, given the quantity and variety of scientific output produced, even just in the context of the Greek city-state. However, if we were to choose one example of this scholarly output to illustrate the richness of the subject, perhaps one could be Gregory Nagy's volume, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, based on the course he has taught at Harvard University since the late 1970s. The course was originally titled "Concepts of the Hero in Greek Civilisation"[1]. In addition to exploring the concept of heroes in ancient Greek literature, the book presents a variety of examples that demonstrate the ancient Greeks' nuanced understanding of war and peace. They did not view these concepts as mere opposites, but rather as deeply interconnected phenomena. War, with all its suffering, anger and glory, is fundamental to the concept of heroism. However, Greek society developed sophisticated mechanisms, ranging from ritual athletic games and hero cults to the creation of laws and philosophical discourse, to mitigate the destructive consequences of conflict, purify pollution, and foster order, justice, and a sense of shared peace and well-being.

The Greeks did not see peace just as merely the absence of conflict. Instead, they conceived of it as the ethical outcome of channelling strife — whether personal, civic or divine — into disciplined reflection, law and virtue. According to this worldview, peace and war were not opposites, but rather phases of the same moral process. Within this tradition, Plutarch's *How to Profit by One's Enemies (De capienda ex inimicis utilitate)* offers a moral meditation on enmity, recasting adversarial relationships not as threats to be eliminated but as resources for self-improvement. This study argues that Plutarch's philosophical stance involves reinterpreting the concepts of victory, war and heroism. It is maintained that Plutarch's teachings encourage individuals to internalise the struggle and cultivate virtue in the face of adversity. In summary, the ethics of conflict can be viewed as a means of achieving peaceful resolutions to violence through the transformation of conflict into personal and civic discipline.

Consequently, the approach will concentrate on Plutarch' *De capienda* and references made by the author to other ancient sources or *exempla* throughout

[1] Nagy 2013: 1.

the treatise. Furthermore, this analysis will extend to two additional treatises: *How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend* (*Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur*) and *On Having too Many Friends (De amicorum multitudine)*. Despite their independence, these texts collectively contribute to the elucidation of the moral underpinnings of peace and conflict within the social fabric of friendship. Even if Plutarch did not write his own theoretical treatise on friendship, akin to those composed by other ancient authors, he demonstrated a confidence in discussing its intricacies and providing counsel to his contemporaries through a pragmatic and dialogical approach[2].

2. *Conflict as Moral Heroism: From Enmity to Ethical Strength*

A fascinating aspect of Plutarch's approach is the manner in which he contributes to the reinterpretation of the traditional Greek conception of heroism, effectively relocating it from the domain of warfare to that of the moral character of the individual. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact that enemies compel individuals to maintain vigilance and dignity. This assertion is supported by a passage that merits full quotation, given its condensation of Plutarch's core argument that enmity can act as a force of moral training: (*De cap. ex inim.*, 87E–88A):

> (87E) καθάπερ γὰρ αἱ πολέμοις ἀστυγειτονικοῖς καὶ στρατείαις ἐνδελεχέσι σωφρονιζόμεναι πόλεις εὐνομίαν καὶ πολιτείαν ὑγιαίνουσαν ἠγάπησαν, οὕτως οἱ δι'ἔχθρας τινὰς ἀναγκασθέντες ἐπινήφειν τῷ βίῳ καὶ φυλάττεσθαι τὸ ῥᾳθυμεῖν καὶ καταφρονεῖν καὶ μετ' εὐχρηστίας ἕκαστα πράττειν λανθάνουσιν εἰς τὸ ἀναμάρτητον ὑπὸ τῆς συνηθείας ἀγόμενοι καὶ κατακοσμούμενοι τὸν τρόπον, ἂν καὶ μικρὸν ὁ λόγος συνεπιλαμβάνηται. τὸ γάρ (87F)
>
> ἦ κεν γηθήσαι Πρίαμος Πριάμοιό τε παῖδες (*Il.* 1.255)
>
> οἷς ἐστιν ἀεὶ πρόχειρον, ἐπιστρέφει καὶ διατρέπει καὶ ἀφίστησι τῶν τοιούτων ἐφ' οἷς οἱ ἐχθροὶ χαίρουσι καὶ καταγελῶσι. καὶ μὴν τοὺς περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον τεχνίτας ὁρῶμεν ἐκλελυμένους καὶ ἀπροθύμους καὶ οὐκ ἀκριβῶς πολλάκις ἀγωνιζομένους ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις ἐφ' ἑαυτῶν· ὅταν δ' ἅμιλλα καὶ ἀγὼν γένηται πρὸς ἑτέρους, οὐ μόνον

[2] As Dias 2010: 7–8, observes, this practical orientation justifies as well the rationale behind her decision to translate these three treatises collectively within a single volume. While these texts share a thematic unity, their arguments are neither repetitive nor contradictory, but rather complementary in addressing different dimensions of social and moral tension. See also Van Hoof 2014: 139, who aligns these three treatises as a significant subset of Plutarch's practical ethical works. These treatises are focused on the reader's conduct within relationships of friendship and kinship, frequently framed as advice addressed to Plutarch's own close friends or relatives.

αὐτοὺς ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ὄργανα μᾶλλον συνεπιστρέφουσι, χορδολογοῦντες καὶ ἀκριβέστερον ἁρμοζόμενοι καὶ καταυλοῦντες. ὅστις οὖν οἶδεν ἀνταγωνιστὴν βίου καὶ δόξης τὸν (88A) ἐχθρὸν ὄντα, προσέχει μᾶλλον αὑτῷ, καὶ τὰ πράγματα περισκοπεῖ καὶ διαρμόζεται τὸν βίον. ἐπεὶ καὶ τοῦτο τῆς κακίας ἴδιόν ἐστι, τὸ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς αἰσχύνεσθαι μᾶλλον ἢ τοὺς φίλους ἐφ' οἷς ἐξαμαρτάνομεν.

For just as states which are chastened by border warfare and continual campaigning become well content with good order and a sound government, so persons who have been compelled on account of enmities to practise soberness of living, to guard against indolence and contemptuousness, and to let some good purpose prompt each act, are insensibly led by force of habit to make no mistakes, and are made orderly in their behaviour, even if reason co-operate but slightly. For when men keep always ready in mind the thought that

'Priam and Priam's sons would in truth have cause for rejoicing',

it causes them to face about and turn aside and abandon such things as give their enemies occasion for rejoicing and derision. Furthermore, we observe that the Dionysiac artists often play their parts in the theatres in a listless, dispirited, and inaccurate way when they are by themselves; but when there is rivalry and competition with another company, then they apply not only themselves but their instruments more attentively, picking their strings and tuning them and playing their flutes in more exact harmony. So the man who knows that his enemy is his competitor in life and repute is more heedful of himself, and more circumspect about his actions, and brings his life into a more thorough harmony. For it is a peculiar mark of vice, that we feel more ashamed of our faults before our enemies than before our friends[3].

Plutarch draws an analogy between border conflict and personal opposition. In the context of frequent warfare, cities evolve to establish stable governments and rigorous discipline (εὐνομίαν καὶ πολιτείαν ὑγιαίνουσαν). It becomes then evident that, despite the negligible role played by reason (μικρὸν ὁ λόγος), habit, when cultivated by pressure, has the capacity to nurture virtue. Plutarch invokes Homer's line about Priam and his sons rejoicing, thereby highlighting the notion that the shame of giving one's enemies reason to celebrate can deter misconduct more effectively than praise

[3] The English version of the quoted passages is that of Babbitt 1928, available at the Perseus Digital Library, with minor adaptations.

from friends[4]. The concept is illustrated by the example of Dionysiac performers (τοὺς περὶ τὸν Διόνυσον τεχνίτας): when alone, they become slack; but when performing in competition, they refine their technique and harmonise their efforts[5]. Similarly, an adversary can compel an individual to exercise greater caution in their actions, aware that their actions are being observed.

The final moral insight is subtle yet profound: vice (τοῦτο τῆς κακίας ἴδιόν ἐστι) is revealed not only in bad action, but also in the desire to hide our flaws from enemies more than from friends. This demonstrates that shame (αἰσχύνεσθαι) is being revalorised as a tool for ethical refinement. Plutarch thus employs the concept of enmity to redefine the notion of moral agency, proposing that even hostile rivalry can serve as a reflection of virtue if it is embraced as a challenge rather than a threat.

Furthermore, Plutarch emphasises in 87B–87D that suffering imposed by others, whether exile, insult, or hardship, may serve as the groundwork for ethical and philosophical transformation. The lives of the cynics Diogenes and Crates (87A) exemplify figures who utilised adversity as a catalyst for reflection and virtue. The anecdote concerning Zeno's shipwreck, which is said to have prompted him to engage in philosophical contemplation (87A), presents a Stoic interpretation of heroic endurance[6].

The use of analogies involving wild animals (87A-B), sea water that is unfit to drink and tastes vile, yet fish thrive in it, and it is a medium for travelling (86D), and the image of a satyr's impulsive desire to kiss fire and Prometheus' warning (86E-F) illustrate that seemingly harmful or untamable things can serve higher purposes. In the context of this work, enemies are therefore depicted as powerful forces that are inherently dangerous if approached with naive impulsiveness (like that of the satyr). However, through the application of rational calculation (*logismos*), learned skill (*techne*), and the tempering of one's own powerful emotions (*pathos*), as well as understanding the transformative potential inherent in conflict, it is possible

4 *Il*. 1.255. Nestor's discourse aims to pacify the discord between Achilles and Agamemnon, underscoring the argument that the Trojans are the primary beneficiaries of the disagreement among the best of the Achaeans.

5 For further information regarding these 'technicians/artists' (*technitai*) or members of a guild of Artists of Dionysus, along with the relevant sources, see Csapo & Slater 1994: 196-202: 239-255.

6 Diogenes of Sinope and Crates were relevant exponents of the Cynic school; Zeno of Citium is the founder of the Stoicism. See Plutarch, *De tranq. an.*, 467D and *De exilio*, 603D; Cf. also Diogenes Laertius, 6.20-21; 85. For a more comprehensive overview of the sources, see Wyttenbach 1820: 493-494, Capriglione & Pérez Jiménez 2008: 99-100.

to extract unique advantages and profit from them that no other relationship could provide. Therefore, in a manner analogous to the necessity of acquiring proficiency in the art of fire, it is equally imperative to develop the skillset necessary for the effective management of adversaries[7].

In *How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend* (53D–55D), Plutarch adds a different angle to this transformation[8]. He warns that expressions of excessive praise and softness have the potential to be particularly harmful to the individual to whom they are directed[9]. The flatterer is the opposite of the enemy: he provides false peace, disables moral vigilance, and disarms one's inner defenses. Unlike the enemy, who can sharpen the soul through confrontation, the flatterer dulls it with comfort and deceit. Consequently, both treatises converge in defining moral heroism not as triumph over others, but as mastery over internal weakness fostered by either hostility or seductive approval.

3. *Guarding Against Barbarism: Moral Restraint and Civic Integrity*

Plutarch cautions against the latent barbarism that can emerge from unchecked enmity. In sections 91B–92E, the author expounds on the idea that hatred can corrupt the soul through treachery and deceit, as well as the pleasure derived from the suffering of others. Such behaviours are frequently normalised during wartime, yet they are detrimental to both civil society and personal virtue. Furthermore, it is evident that customs established during periods of conflict often persist into peacetime, frequently remaining in place long after their practical application has ceased (*De cap. ex inim.*, 91B):

> ὥσπερ γὰρ ἐν πολέμῳ πολλὰ τῶν ἀναγκαίων ἄλλως δὲ φαύλων ἔθους λαβόντα καὶ νόμου δύναμιν οὐκ ἔστι ῥᾳδίως ἀπώσασθαι καὶ βλαπτομένους, οὕτως ἡ ἔχθρα συνεισάγουσα τῷ μίσει φθόνον, ζηλοτυπίαν ἐπιχαιρεκακίαν μνησικακίαν ἐναπολείπει.

[7] For a detailed analysis of this topic, see the works of Capriglione 2007, 2011, who emphasises the significance of *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* in comprehending Plutarch's sophisticated perspective on human nature, particularly with regard to his treatment of passions (*pathe*) and his pragmatic yet ethical political philosophy. Capriglione 2011 is centred on the motif of the satyr yearning to kiss fire.

[8] Engberg-Pedersen 1996: 77 emphasises that Plutarch's analysis of skillful flattery becomes particularly disturbing. This form of flattery constitutes a direct attack on the values that facilitate honest self-examination and ethical growth, including trust, sincerity, truthfulness and moral stability.

[9] Konstan 1997: 103 discusses the concepts of frankness and *parrhesia* in the context of Plutarch's *Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur*. The author accentuates Plutarch's emphasis on the significance of timing (*kairos*) in the utilisation of frankness, suggesting that the judicious selection of the opportune moment is crucial for the efficacy of frank communication.

> Just as many of the things which are necessary in war, but bad under other conditions, when they once acquire the sanction of custom and law, cannot easily be abolished by the people even though the people are being injured by them, so enmity introduces envy along with hatred, and leaves as a residue jealousy, joy over others' misfortunes, and vindictiveness.

Here, Plutarch warns that practices necessary in warfare often become established through custom and law (λαβόντα καὶ νόμου δύναμιν), even when they cease to serve the common good. These wartime habits, once made a regular part of life, are hard to change and continue even after the war is over, hurting the people (βλαπτομένους) they were supposed to protect. This comparison helps to illuminate something important about ethics. Just like cities can be controlled by old and harmful war traditions, people can also start to feel and behave in ways that are caused by feelings of hate, jealousy, and wanting to get revenge. In this view, enmity is not just a reaction to a situation, but a moral contagion. Unless actively checked, it leaves behind a residue of vice that distorts character. This underscores Plutarch's broader concern that the transformation of conflict into virtue demands not only active resistance to violence but also vigilance against the corruption of one's moral habits. In summary, it is imperative to cultivate internal peace with the same level of discipline as external war is fought.

In order to combat this erosion of moral values, Plutarch encourages the implementation of ethical discipline. In 90D–91A, he praises the model of dignified silence in the face of abuse, invoking the example of Heracles (90D), who, according to legend, did not deign to heed even a fly when insulted. Socrates is another paradigm (90E): his patience with his quarrelsome wife Xanthippe is likened to training for wider social endurance. These *exempla* stress that responding to enemies without retaliation is not weakness, but rather disciplined strength. The capacity to endure affronts is indicative of an inner peace that is also manifest in external relations. Plutarch also cites Pythagoras (91C-D), who is reported to have trained people in gentleness by extending compassion even to animals[10]. By redirecting aggression away from enemies, individuals can cultivate benevolence towards friends. Consequently, the act of resisting the inclination to act with hostility is not merely a matter of restraint; rather, it signifies a more advanced form of peacekeeping and civic strength.

[10] Capriglione & Pérez Jiménez 2008: 109 emphasise that Plutarch appears to adhere to Pythagoras' 'moderate' vegetarianism. This is inspired not only by the rejection of violence, but also by the need to safeguard the domestic heritage of which animals were an essential part.

*On Having Too Many Friends* (93D–95A) complements this analysis by showing how superficial attachments can generate internal social strife. Multiplying friendships indiscriminately leads to conflict, competition, and fragmentation. Plutarch notes that true peace in social life depends on selecting companions whose character promotes stability and mutual correction, rather than political utility or vanity. Thus, warlike habits, even in friendship, must be tempered by moral discernment.

4. *Victory Reimagined: Ethical Superiority over Dominance*

Plutarch builds a powerful argument that true triumph over one's enemies does not come from harming them, reducing their status or wealth, or responding to insults with insults. Instead, it comes through becoming good — that is, being morally superior in terms of character, self-control and conduct[11]. He thus reinterprets victory, suggesting that the highest triumph lies in being morally superior to one's adversary (88B–88E). To illustrate his point, he quotes a saying by the cynic Diogenes (*De cap. ex inim.*, 88B):

> ἔτι τοίνυν πρόσλαβε τὴν Διογένους ἀπόφασιν, φιλόσοφον σφόδρα καὶ πολιτικὴν οὖσαν· πῶς ἀμυνοῦμαι τὸν ἐχθρόν; αὐτὸς καλὸς κἀγαθὸς γενόμενος.
>
> Moreover, as a supplement to this take the declaration of Diogenes, which is thoroughly philosophic and statesmanlike: 'How shall I defend myself against my enemy?' 'By proving yourself good and honourable.'[12] .

The battlefield becomes internal: victory is ethical transformation, not domination. Plutarch then elaborates on the psychological impact of such virtue on one's adversaries. The passage suggests that nothing wounds an enemy more deeply than seeing the object of their hatred become universally admired for their goodness, orderliness and usefulness. Unlike external markers of success, such as horses, dogs and land, which already provoke envy, virtue hits at the core of the envious person's insecurities. Plutarch also invokes poetic authorities (88B–C): Pindar's line (frag. 229 Christ), which states that the vanquished are silenced when their opponents surpass them in virtue; and Demosthenes' assertion that "noble actions retard the tongue, stop the mouth, constrict the throat, and leave one with nothing to say"[13].

[11] Ingenkamp 2016: 230 states that *De capienda* is an "imposing document of Plutarch's ability to handle conflicts, dissent and altercations".

[12] Cf. Plutarch, *De aud. poet.*, 21E, where the same saying is invoked when Diogenes plays an ethically positive role, drawing parallels with Socrates and contrasting with Sophocles. See Várzeas 2022: 53-54.

[13] *De cap. ex inim.*, 88C: ταῦτ' ἀποστρέφει τὴν γλῶτταν […] ἐμφράττει τὸ στόμα, ἄγχει, σιωπᾶν ποιεῖ. Cf. Demosthenes, *De falsa legatione*, 19.208.

Plutarch demonstrates how nobility can convert revilement into self-reflection. In 89A–89F, he argues that being labelled a coward, an adulterer or an ignorant should prompt an individual to consider whether the insult may be valid and, if so, to take corrective action. He even cites anecdotes involving Crassus and Domitius (89A), as well as the 'Thessalian Prometheus' (89C — a nickname for Jason of Pherae[14]), to highlight how remaining above reproach is the most devastating rebuttal to enmity.

To further emphasise that personal virtue is enhanced by rivalry rather than extinguished by it, Plutarch recounts the famous story of Themistocles, who was unable to sleep due to Miltiades' previous victory at Marathon (*De cap. ex inim.*, 92B–C):

> διὸ καὶ τὰς ἀμίλλας πρὸς ἐκείνους ἐστὶ ποιητέον ὑπὲρ δόξης ἢ ἀρχῆς ἢ πορισμῶν δικαίων, μὴ δακνομένους μόνον, ἄν τι πλέον ἡμῶν ἔχωσιν, ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντα παραφυλάττοντας ἐξ ὧν πλέον ἔχουσι, καὶ πειρωμένους ὑπερβαλέσθαι ταῖς ἐπιμελείαις καὶ φιλοπονίαις καὶ τῷ σωφρονεῖν καὶ προσέχειν ἑαυτοῖς, ὡς Θεμιστοκλῆς ἔλεγεν οὐκ ἐᾶν αὐτὸν καθεύδειν τὴν ἐν Μαραθῶνι Μιλτιάδου νίκην.
>
> For this reason it is with our enemies that we must also engage in rivalry for repute or office or honest money-getting, not only feeling the sting of resentment if they get the advantage of us, but also watching carefully every means by which they get the advantage, and trying to surpass them in painstaking, diligence, self-control, and self-criticism: after the manner of Themistocles, who said that Miltiades' victory at Marathon would not let him sleep.

This story is not intended to promote envy, but rather to demonstrate how the success of others, even adversaries, can inspire noble ambition. Plutarch encourages rivalry, but in a positive sense: not as hostile envy, but as constructive emulation. Competing with enemies for honour, leadership or legitimate gain is not inherently negative, so long as it provokes a virtuous response. The key is to watch one's adversaries closely, not to harm or outmanoeuvre them, but to identify and imitate the habits that make them successful. The story of Themistocles, who was sleepless after Miltiades' victory at Marathon, is emblematic of this ideal. It illustrates how another's glory, when perceived as a personal challenge, can inspire moral ambition. Themistocles does not seek to discredit Miltiades, but rather to earn the same level of acclaim, transforming envy into diligence[15].

[14] For further information on other sources, see Wyttenbach 1820: 500-501.

[15] Stadter 1992: 49 and 54 n. 35 highlights Themistocles as a case of what he calls a 'paradoxical paradigm': his rivalry with Aristides — and earlier, his envy of Miltiades'

This theme reappears in reverse in *How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend* (56A–58A). The flatterer denies his interlocutors this opportunity by refusing to offer any criticism. He falsely assures them of their victories, thereby preventing the kind of reflection that can transform defeat into improvement. Unlike an open enemy, the flatterer deprives those he interacts with of the very struggle from which ethical victory can arise. Thus, Plutarch argues that moral superiority is forged in adversity, not comfort.

### 5. *Political and Social Harmony Through Ethical Conflict Management*

Although *How to Profit by One's Enemies* is addressed to a specific individual, Cornelius Pulcher (86B)[16], Plutarch uses historical examples throughout the text that have resonance beyond the Roman context, offering a broader perspective on civic ethics[17]. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these references in detail, some of them are nevertheless worth mentioning in order to expand the scope of the treatise, despite its marked focus on the individual dimension[18]. In fact, Plutarch notes from the outset that even in the best and most equitable forms of governance, rivalry, jealousy and conflict are unavoidable: "For our very friendships, if nothing else, involve us in enmities. This is what the wise Chilon had in mind, when he asked the man who boasted that he had no enemy whether he had no friend either"[19]. While

glory — served not to deepen hostility but to prompt a decisive break from youthful recklessness and inspire a pursuit of greatness.

16 Capriglione 2007: 42 emphasises that *De capienda* "è opera rivolta alla vita pratica scritta per un politico in ascesa come Cornelio Pulcro". Van Hoof 2010: 79 contends that, despite Plutarch rarely explicitly articulating his objective of opposing rival philosophical schools, his writings position him as the authoritative voice. His counsel is presented as the one sought by influential readers, reinforcing his cultural and political prestige and subtly asserting his prominence within the philosophical landscape.

17 As Stadter 2014: 6 asserts, Plutarch's ethical vision, influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian thought, emphasises the cultivation of the soul through reason to achieve mastery over one's passions and to pursue elevated moral objectives. Though rooted in Greek philosophy, this outlook is presented as universally human, not exclusively Greek or Roman. His works presume a reader attuned to this shared moral framework of *paideia* and virtue. Stadter's remark pertains principally to the *Lives*; nevertheless, it is conceivable to extend its application to the specific treatises currently under analysis.

18 As Dias 2010: 170 points out, although Plutarch initially frames the treatise as useful for a statesman like Cornelius Pulcher — particularly in managing the inevitable tensions of public life —, his argument soon shifts towards the ethical domain of the individual. The treatise's main focus becomes the individual's responsibility for self-improvement and moral development, even though its political *exempla* lend the discourse broader relevance.

19 86C: ἀλλ' εἰ μηδὲν ἄλλο, ταῖς ἔχθραις αἱ φιλίαι συμπλέκουσιν ἡμᾶς· ὃ καὶ Χίλων ὁ

political life is inherently competitive, Plutarch argues that these tensions should be redirected towards moral and institutional improvement, rather than being suppressed or eliminated.

Plutarch offers several instructive anecdotes. In 91D, for example, he recounts how, despite being an enemy of Domitius, Marcus Aemilius Scaurus refused to listen to secret denunciations from a slave, thus upholding both legal justice and civic decorum[20]. This demonstrates that treating one's opponents with procedural fairness, even amid conflict, strengthens leadership credibility. Similarly, at 91D-E, Cato the Younger is commended for his transparency: he allowed even his political opponents to observe his financial and legal dealings, demonstrating a strong dedication to public transparency and the impartiality of the law[21]. These examples embody Plutarch's belief that ethical behaviour in times of enmity affirms the legitimacy of public life.

Moreover, Plutarch invokes the pragmatic insight of Demus, a Chian statesman[22] who advised keeping some enemies within the city to prevent internal fragmentation (*De cap. ex inim.*, 91F-92A):

> καὶ τοῦτο, ὡς ἔοικε, συνιδὼν πολιτικὸς ἀνὴρ ὄνομα Δῆμος, ἐν Χίῳ τῆς κρατούσης μερίδος ἐν στάσει γενόμενος, παρῄνει τοῖς ἑταίροις μὴ πάντας ἐξελάσαι τοὺς ἀντιστασιάσαντας, ἀλλ' ὑπολιπέσθαι τινάς, "ὅπως" ἔφη "μὴ πρὸς τοὺς φίλους ἀρξώμεθα διαφέρεσθαι, τῶν ἐχθρῶν παντάπασιν ἀπαλλαγέντες." οὐκοῦν καὶ ἡμῶν καταναλισκόμενα ταῦτα τὰ πάθη πρὸς τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ἧττον, ἐνοχλήσει τοῖς φίλοις.
>
> This fact, as it seems, a statesman, Demus by name, apprehended: when he found himself on the winning side in a civil strife in Chios, he advised his party associates not to banish all their opponents, but to leave some of them behind, "In order,"

σοφὸς νοήσας τὸν εἰπόντα μηδένα ἔχειν ἐχθρὸν ἠρώτησεν εἰ μηδὲ φίλον ἔχοι. This saying is also mentioned in *On Having Too Many Friends* (96A). Regarding the reference to this same dictum in Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights*, see Boulogne 2003: 12 and 22.

20 Plutarch reverses here the positions of Domitius and Scaurus, as accuser and accused. Cf. Cicero, *Or. pro Rege Deiotaro,* 11.

21 In the biography of Cato the Younger (*Ca. Mi.* 21), Plutarch provides a more detailed explanation of this episode.

22 Cf. *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae* 813A-B, where Demus (or Onomademus) is referred to quite plainly as a 'demagogue' (ὁ τῶν Χίων δημαγωγός). Notably, while in *De capienda* he is cited as a relatively positive example, in the *Praecepta* he is criticized for naïveté (τοῦτο μὲν γὰρ εὔηθες), suggesting a more ambivalent evaluation of his political judgment across Plutarch's works. See also Capriglione & Pérez Jiménez 2008: 110-111.

> he said, "that we may not begin to quarrel with our friends, through being completely rid of our enemies." So also in our own case, if our emotions of this sort are expended upon our enemies, they will cause less annoyance to our friends.

The advice given here recognises a vital principle: that visible, externalised opposition can stabilise the political landscape[23]. If all opposition is silenced or removed, citizens may turn on each other, leading to civil unrest. In this way, Demus lends political expression to Plutarch's broader philosophical principle that, when managed properly, conflict is not antithetical to harmony, but foundational to it.

This *ethos* aligns with the insights from *On Having Too Many Friends* (94B–95F), in which Plutarch condemns the accumulation of superficial social connections. He warns that forming alliances without discrimination can impair political discernment and foster distrust. True concord requires a moral economy of relationships, in which clarity, selectivity and principled interaction govern social conduct. Similarly, in *How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend*, Plutarch warns against individuals who undermine civic unity by appealing to ambition and vanity (55E, 59A), offering deceitful reassurance instead of honest truth. Flatterers and opportunistic alliances both weaken the shared values that sustain the political order.

In these interconnected treatises, Plutarch sets out a consistent vision: the well-being of the city-state hinges not on eliminating tension, but on nurturing the virtues — justice, integrity and moderation — that transform tension into a source of balance rather than rupture. In his view, political and social harmony is the result of transforming conflict ethically, not suppressing it.

### 6. *Conclusion: From the Battlefield to the Soul*

Plutarch's *How to Profit by One's Enemies* offers a striking reconfiguration of ancient Greek notions of war, peace, and heroism. Rooted in a tradition that viewed conflict as both destructive and formative, Plutarch reframes enmity not as a source of ruin but as a resource for ethical cultivation. This treatise invites a rethinking of what constitutes victory: not the defeat or humiliation of the adversary, but the moral elevation of the self through the principles of discipline, introspection, and constructive rivalry.

[23] In commenting this particular excerpt, Pelling 2014: 157 asserts that the "top-down nature of such leadership is clear, and Plutarch's advice on assembly management is disturbing to a modern ear". This manipulative approach to maintaining concord is also reflected in the work of Desideri 2012: 293, who highlights Plutarch's 'Machiavellian' suggestions for political leaders to use "finto dissenso interno" (feigned internal dissent) to create maximum possible consensus and avoid civil strife (*stasis*).

Drawing upon a wide range of literary, philosophical, and political *exempla*, Plutarch demonstrates that enemies can serve as catalysts for personal improvement. In contrast to seeking retribution, the wise individual utilises the scrutiny of opponents to refine their conduct and address their shortcomings. As demonstrated in the analogy with border conflict (87E–88A), the presence of external threats has been shown to stabilise and strengthen internal governance, whether in urban or spiritual contexts. This theoretical shift in perspective implies a transformation of the traditional martial virtues of vigilance, resilience, and self-mastery into instruments for ethical self-formation.

The psychological insight inherent in Plutarch's argument is particularly striking. He observes that individuals often feel more ashamed in the presence of their adversaries than their allies. This phenomenon highlights the idea that social animosity can lead to a deeper moral introspection than relationships formed in more comfortable and convenient circumstances. In this regard, the contrast he draws between the honest enemy and the manipulative flatterer is particularly powerful. Thus, enmity can stimulate virtue, prompting individuals to strive for excellence and overcome challenges.

Moreover, the inclusion of political examples, such as the anecdotes concerning Scaurus, Cato, and the Chian statesman Demus, illustrates that the ethical management of conflict also supports civic stability. Enmity, when guided by fairness and transparency, can reinforce justice and prevent the fragmentation of political entities. Plutarch's reflections suggest that ethical conflict – rather than uncritical unity or suppression of dissent – is vital for a well-functioning polis.

The juxtaposition with the treatises *On Having Too Many Friends* and *How to Distinguish a Flatterer from a Friend* serves to further refine and expand this perspective. They extend the ethical logic of *How to Profit by One's Enemies* to the domain of social relationships, thereby reinforcing the notion that virtue does not stem from the absence of tension, but rather from its judicious transformation. Together, these texts create a complex ethical framework in which adversity, competition and self-control are viewed as essential components of harmony rather than obstacles to it.

In essence, Plutarch encourages his audience, whether they be statesmen or citizens, to reinterpret conflict as a catalyst for personal and societal development. In this ethical framework, peace does not involve the negation of strife; rather, it is a redirection of it. In this way, *How to Profit by One's Enemies* emerges as a sophisticated philosophical meditation, offering a vision of human flourishing that reconciles the agonistic spirit of the Greek tradition with the moral demands of a civic and personal peace.

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