



Pierluigi Donini, *Plutarco: Il demone di Socrate*

di

GEERT ROSKAM

*De genio Socratis* is often considered as one of Plutarch's best works. It is a lively dialogue in which Caphisias, the brother of Epameinondas, relates how a group of conspirators succeeded in liberating Thebes from Spartan rule in 379 BC. We hear about the decisive events, when the group meets in Simmias' house, prepares itself for the attack, waits for news and reacts to sudden peripetias, and we are also informed about their conversations. And these, strikingly enough, are not about the contemporary political situation or constitutional matters, nor about strategic plans, but about philosophical issues such as the correct interpretation of the inscription on Alcmena's tomb, the question as to whether Epameinondas should accept the large amount of gold that is offered to him as a present, and, of course, the notorious problem of Socrates' 'divine sign', his *δαμόνιον*, which has given the work its title.

The dialogue, in short, contains a well-considered balance between philosophical reflection and concrete action, between *λόγοι* and *πράξεις*. This certainly adds much to the attractiveness of the work, yet at the same time it entails a difficult problem, viz. that of its unity. Scholars have often wondered what the connection is between the philosophical theoretical reflections and the energetic liberation of Thebes and they usually find the answer in the complex relation between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* (see, e.g., M. Riley, *The Purpose and Unity of Plutarch's De genio Socratis*, «Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies» 18 (1977), pp. 257-273; D. Babut, *Le dialogue de Plutarque sur le démon de Socrate. Essai d'interprétation*, «Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé» 1 (1984), pp. 51-76; A. Georgiadou, *Vita activa and vita contemplativa. Plutarch's De genio Socratis and Euripides'*

RECENSIONI

Syzthesis V/1 (2018) 129-135

ISSN 1974-5044 - <http://www.syzthesis.it>

129

Antiope, in I. Gallo-B. Scardigli (eds.), *Teoria e prassi politica nelle opere di Plutarco*, D'Auria, Napoli 1995, pp. 187-200). Epameinondas, the so-called 'Boeotian Socrates', then appears as a key figure (cfr. also A. Barigazzi, *Una nuova interpretazione del De genio Socratis*, «Illinois Classical Studies» 13/2 (1988), pp. 409-425). In his introduction to his new edition with commentary, Pierluigi Donini proposes an interesting new solution that throws a completely different light on this issue.

Donini begins by placing the dialogue in the broader context of Plutarch's Platonism. How did Plutarch understand his own Platonic philosophy? Donini here recalls two different philosophical genealogies that can be found in Plutarch's works and which he has repeatedly discussed in earlier publications. On the one hand, Plutarch accepts a tradition that begins with Parmenides and Heraclitus, and is further developed by Socrates, Plato and the New Academy of Arcesilaus (*Adversus Colotem* 1121F-1122A). On the other hand, he also repeatedly points to an alternative tradition that connects Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle (see esp. *De virtute morali* 441E-442C; cfr. also *De Iside et Osiride* 370EF). Donini then understands the principal purpose and meaning of *De genio Socratis* against this specific background. In his view, Plutarch's first aim in this work has nothing to do with the relation between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, but rather concerns the precise place of Pythagorean philosophy in Platonism.

Pythagorean elements are indeed prominently present in *De genio Socratis*. Theanor is explicitly introduced as a Pythagorean philosopher (582E) and Simmias and Epameinondas likewise endorse Pythagorean positions. Interestingly enough, though, none of these three characters adopts the same kind of Pythagoreanism. Theanor is the "professional" Pythagorean philosopher who follows a "pure" form of Pythagoreanism. His position shows some overlap with Platonic doctrines, but Theanor also differs from Platonic thinkers in following a less stringent argumentative course and defending more dogmatic views. Theanor, then, is definitely not Plutarch's ideal philosopher.

Epameinondas is a more interesting figure. He is also influenced by Pythagorean thinking but combines this with Academic tendencies, as appears from his reaction to Simmias' lengthy discussion of Socrates' divine sign. For Epameinondas, in spite of all his erudition, simply keeps silent, refusing to make his own contribution to the debate. His father explains this attitude by pointing to Epameinondas' silent character which is cautious in speaking (592F: τὸ ἡθὸς...τὸ τοῦτου, σιωπηλὸν καὶ πρὸς τοὺς λόγους εὐλαβές). This phrase recalls

the Academic εὐλάβεια and suggests that Epameinondas improves his Pythagoreanism with sound Academic insights. On closer inspection, however, Epameinondas goes too far: for Academic εὐλάβεια, of course, does not imply complete silence, that is, the abandonment of all further enquiry. In other words, Epameinondas seems to erroneously interpret εὐλάβεια as an ἐποχή περὶ πάντων. In that sense, he adopts an extreme and problematic position, which implies that he cannot be regarded as Plutarch's ideal philosopher either. This important insight is further corroborated by the myth of Timarchus and by the view of Theanor, which both imply, as Donini convincingly demonstrates, that Epameinondas is on a lower level than the pure and "daimonic" Socrates.

To a certain extent, Simmias surpasses Epameinondas, and he is for Donini in many respects the most important philosopher in *De genio Socratis* (p. 36: «il più importante e compiuto filosofo tra i personaggi del *dgS*»). Simmias' interpretation of Socrates' "divine sign" is open-minded, does not rest on absolute and apodictic truth claims, but is nevertheless a sincere attempt to look for the truth. Simmias, then, carefully avoids the extreme positions of Theanor and Epameinondas. From a methodological and epistemological point of view, his course is arguably the best one. Yet Simmias does not participate in the political action and thus is not directly useful for Thebes. On this point, Epameinondas is clearly superior, and this aspect should not be underestimated for a Platonist like Plutarch, who attached great importance to politics and who actively engaged in politics himself. Even Simmias, then, does not embody the figure of the perfect philosopher. Donini's painstaking analysis thus shows that the different characters all adopt their own interpretation of Pythagorean philosophy and that none of them actually expresses Plutarch's own position. This, in my view, is one of the most important new insights that are defended in this rich and thought-provoking introduction.

At the end of the introduction, Donini offers his readers a broader perspective by examining what Plutarch has reached in the dialogue and what he has left open. For Donini, the most important goal of the work, as said above, is the study of the place of Pythagoreanism within Platonic philosophy. The precise relation between both schools is far from clear and scholars have often struggled with this issue. Significantly enough, Neopythagorean authors are nowadays often seen as a kind of Platonists (cfr., e.g., J. Dillon, *Pythagoreanism in the Academic Tradition: The Early Academy to Numenius*, in C. A. Huffman (ed.), *A*

*History of Pythagoreanism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, p. 250: «Neopythagoreans were Platonists and not themselves directly affiliated to anything that could be described as a Pythagorean “school”»; cfr. also C. Riedweg, *Pythagoras. His Life, Teaching, and Influence*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London 2005, pp. 124-125 and M. Bonazzi, *Eudorus of Alexandria and the ‘Pythagorean’ pseudepigrapha*, in G. Cornelli-R. McKirahan-C. Macris (eds.), *On Pythagoreanism*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2013, p. 400). Plutarch here provides an interesting criterion to distinguish between the two philosophical traditions, viz. their different attitude towards Academic scepticism.

Donini also points to three big questions that receive no definitive answer in *De genio Socrates*. (1) Should Epameinondas accept Theanor’s present or is he right in declining it? Simmias merely concludes the debate by saying that Epameinondas and Theanor should settle this dispute themselves (585DE). (2) Is the violence used by the conspirators to set Thebes free acceptable from a moral point of view? This question is nowhere conclusively answered. (3) How should Socrates’ “divine sign” finally be understood? Several options have been elaborated by different participants in the dialogue, but once again, we do not receive a final and definitive answer.

In general, Donini’s book shows all the qualities of its eminent author. Donini’s overall interpretation of *De genio Socratis* is innovative and challenging, his argumentation is careful, clear and erudite. While the bibliography is far from exhaustive and actually shows a certain preference for Italian literature and philosophical studies, there can be no doubt about Donini’s wide reading. His view always rests on an impressive πολυμαθία. Moreover, this πολυμαθία is generally combined with excellent philological ἀκριβεία. Donini masterly knows how to read and interpret particular passages. His philosophical interpretations are always based on close reading and in-depth analysis. These eminent philological skills also appear from his careful translation and his commentary. The latter contains concise but useful and reliable information about *realia* and parallel passages, next to exegetical notes and discussions of problems of textual criticism. Regarding such matters, Donini often shows himself to be a careful and cautious reader gifted with a prudent judgement.

This book, then, has certainly much to recommend it. Yet the reader should know that it offers an introduction *sui generis* to the dialogue. Donini loses no time in providing some general information about Plutarch as an author, nor does he deal at length with the

difficult question of the date of the work, with its literary genre, its target readers, its language and style. All this is simply taken for granted. More importantly, the introduction is not without a certain interpretative bias, in that Donini ascribes a quite specific philosophical agenda to the work. For Donini, as stated above, the main goal of *De genio Socratis* is to examine the relation between Pythagoreanism and Platonism. From such a perspective, however, the relevance of the historical part of *De genio Socratis*, which fills more than half of the work, is unduly neglected. Donini claims that the historical details are indeed important for the philosophical issue (pp. 63-64), but he nowhere elaborates this view and this reader at least keeps wondering what can be the relevance of the delivery of Thebes for the specific philosophical question that Donini discusses. This is a problem that deserves much more attention than it receives in Donini's book.

At the beginning of his introduction (p. 12; cfr. also his commentary on pp. 164-165), however, Donini refers to a programmatic passage at the outset of *De audiendis poetis* (14E). There Plutarch argues that young people are more enthusiastic about philosophical doctrines when these are combined with mythological stories. This, in Donini's view, can easily be applied to *De genio Socratis*: all the historical material which the work contains has no end in itself but can ultimately be reduced to the philosophical agenda. It helps in making all this philosophical stuff more digestible to the readers. In my view, however, this reflects a one-sided and oversimplifying interpretation which fails to do justice to the historical account as an end in itself. History also had its own agenda for Plutarch. After all, he also wrote the *Parallel Lives* and this ambitious project was presumably not conceived as a way to examine technical philosophical questions in a more entertaining, historical context. In that sense, Donini misses an important aspect of the whole dialogue, and it is symptomatic indeed that Plutarch's *Life of Pelopidas* is hardly mentioned at all in the introduction. Donini is not interested in the similarities and differences between *De genio Socratis* and the *Life of Pelopidas*, nor in a narratological analysis of *De genio Socratis*, nor in a detailed discussion and evaluation of Plutarch's dealing with historical material (as compared, for instance, with Xenophon, Diodorus of Sicily or Nepos). Donini, in short, only deals with one essential aspect of the dialogue, and, although he no doubt comes up with an interesting interpretation, *De genio Socratis* has much more to offer than Donini suggests.

Moreover, a more thorough comparison with the *Parallel Lives*

would have been very helpful in another way too, as it would have thrown more light on several questions which, as Donini has shown, remain open in the dialogue. As to the problem of the moral licitness of violence, for instance, Donini finds it surprising that Plutarch avoids clear answers in *De genio Socratis*, given that he elsewhere in his oeuvre usually adopts a much more straightforward and clearer position on such questions (cfr. p. 66: «È cosa estremamente singolare, senza veri paralleli, a mia notizia, nella produzione di Plutarco»). Donini suggests that Plutarch's caution may here be explained by Plato's inconsistency on this issue. This is an interesting suggestion indeed, but as a matter of fact, Plutarch's cautious approach is far less exceptional than Donini thinks. In the *Parallel Lives*, such an approach is indeed omnipresent. Plutarch there usually refrains from clear-cut answers and rather prefers a morally problematizing approach (see esp. the ground-breaking study of T. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives. Exploring Virtue and Vice*, Clarendon, Oxford 1999), raising complicated moral questions and then taking his readers seriously and leaving the final answer to them (cfr. Id., *Plutarch's Lives and the Critical Reader*, in G. Roskam-L. Van der Stockt (eds.), *Virtues for the People. Aspects of Plutarchan Ethics*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2011, pp. 59-82). In both the *Parallel Lives* and *De genio Socratis* the dynamics of moral thinking, of open-ended ζήτησις concerning moral issues, is often more important than black and white solutions and absolute truth claims.

This also holds true for the complex question of Socrates "divine sign". Although Donini has many interesting things to say about this section, there is at least as much that is ignored. The introduction contains no information about parallel texts (such as Maximus of Tyre, Apuleius, and later Neoplatonist interpretations) and does not offer a systematic and detailed analysis of Plutarch's arguments (the lengthy exegetical notes in the commentary do not suffice to fill this gap). In our view, Donini here as well fails to do justice to Plutarch's "zetetic" approach. He only focuses on three answers (viz. the view of Simmias, the myth of Timarchus, and the view of Theanor), ignoring both Theocritus' "naive" interpretation (which, in fact, is often but unduly neglected in scholarly research; see on this G. Roskam, *Theocritus' view of Socrates' Divine Sign in De genio Socratis 580CF*, in A. Casanova (ed.), *Figure d'Atene nelle opere di Plutarco*, Firenze University Press, Firenze 2013, pp. 233-248) and Galaxidorus' view (rejecting, without compelling arguments, the interpretation of D. Babut, *La part du rationalisme dans la religion de Plutarque: l'exemple du*

*De genio Socratis*, «Illinois Classical Studies» 13/2 (1988), pp. 383-407). All of these positions, including the “naive” ones, contain valuable elements that make them worth mentioning. The dynamics of such creative thinking risks being obscured by a priori schemes or well-defined philosophical agendas. Again, the relevance and scope of this section, and of *De genio Socratis* as a whole, is much greater than the specific question regarding the place of Pythagoreanism in the Platonic tradition.

To conclude, Donini’s book is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on Plutarch’s *De genio Socratis*. It is brilliant in its bias, and this, perhaps, is the privilege of truly great minds. In this light, our judgement of Donini can only concur with Simmias’ characterization of Epameinondas: μέγας, μέγας ἀνὴρ ἔστιν (585D).

*KU Leuven*

[geert.roskam@kuleuven.be](mailto:geert.roskam@kuleuven.be)

Donini, Pierluigi (Introduzione, traduzione e commento di), *Plutarco: Il demone di Socrate*, Carocci, Roma 2017, 215 pp., € 17,00.