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Aesthetics as Religious Hermeneutics in Plutarch

In recent years scholars have drawn attention to the religious character of Plutarch's philosophy. This character has, arguably, important implications for his concept of the perception of the physical world and for his aesthetics. Plutarch describes the world in religious terms. The *kosmos* is for him both an expression of divine providence and an image of divine nature and grace: "For the universe is a most holy temple and most worthy of god; into it man is introduced through birth as a spectator, not of handmade or immovable images, but of those sensible representations of knowable things that the divine mind, says Plato, has revealed" (*De tranq. an.* 477C-D; transl. following Helmbold). With the explicit reference to Plato, Plutarch says that every aspect of the sensible world, sun and moon and stars, rivers and earth which supply all living beings with nourishment, are images of the intelligible world, of the divine mind, of God. In a sublime tone characteristic of hymn-writing, Plutarch here compares birth into life, where man becomes conscious of all these images, to an initiation into the mysteries. By setting these images before us day after day, God acts as a *choregos* and *mystagogos*, leading us towards himself and his divine reality. Aesthetics thus becomes religious hermeneutics.

Plutarch's positive attitude towards the physical world and his attribution of a religious and epistemological value to aesthetics are the main subject of this paper. Such tendencies are reflected in Plutarch's philosophical and religious interpretation of various works of art, in his surprising acceptance of the Egyptian veneration of animals as images of the divine, and in the recurrent usage of metaphors and images in his quest for the divine truth. This attitude is no matter of course against the background of the philosophy of Plato, whom Plutarch revered as his philosophical master. Plato considered the sensible a shadow of the intelligible and introduced the theory of *anamnēsis* to establish a firm point of reference, beyond the realm of aesthetics, for attaining the intelligible. Plutarch's views also appear at odds with the general tendencies of philosophy and religion of his time. Stoic philosophy regards the body, as Epictetus puts it, as no more than a donkey to be cared for and views the perceptions of the body only as an obstacle to the proclaimed goal of *ataraxia*. In the New Testament writings, the first epistle of John (1 John) warns emphatically not to rely upon the world and its treacherous lust. In 'Gnostic' dualistic writings, the corporeal world is viewed as the realm of evil, which encloses and imprisons the divine spark. There is, however, a striking parallel to Plutarch's optimism concerning the status of the physical world in his Middle Platonic predecessor, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria.

In the first part of the paper I will look at Plutarch's positive attitude towards the physical world and aesthetics by exploring his theory of images and his philosophical and religious usage of the same, whereas, in the second part, I will place this positive attitude into a wider historical and philosophical context. In conclusion, I will argue that the perception of the physical world as an image of the intelligible is fundamental for Plutarch's religious and philosophical thinking as well as for his literary production. Since God has stamped his intelligible essence into the physical world, the various

aspects of the world bear traces of the intelligible realm. In this way, they offer a path to salvation—they open the gate to *homôisis theôi*, the ultimate goal of human life.