



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

**THIS SHEET MUST BE THE FIRST PAGE OF THE ASSIGNMENT YOU ARE SUBMITTING
(DO NOT SEND AS A SEPARATE FILE)**

For completion by the student:		
Student Name: Kevin S. Goodrich		
Student University Email: 2204677@student.UWTSD.ac.uk		
Module code: HPCA7027 Module title: Aspects of Greek and Roman Religion and Cult	Student ID number: 2204677	Educational support needs: Yes/ No
Assignment title: Critical Review of Plutarch's De Defectu Oraculorum		
This assignment is for the module of the degree 1 st ☐ 2 nd ☒ 3 rd ☐ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ 6 th ☐		
I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism. Signed: Kevin S. Goodrich Email submission: if you are submitting this form via email, please tick this box ☐ (as a substitute for your signature) to confirm that you agree to the above declaration.		

Assignment Mark	
1 st Marker's Provisional mark	
2 nd Marker's/Moderator's provisional mark	
External Examiner's mark (if relevant)	
Final Mark	

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the Final Examination Board.

For completion by Marker 1 :

Comments:

Marker's signature:	Date:
---------------------	-------

For completion by Marker 2/Moderator:

Comments:

Marker's Signature:	Date:
---------------------	-------

External Examiner's comments (if relevant)

External Examiner's Signature:	Date:

Kevin Goodrich

HPCA7027

March 19, 2023

Critical Review of Plutarch's *De Defectu oraculorum*

Introduction

This paper aims to critically review Plutarch's famous '*De Defectu oraculorum*' or '*On the Obsolescence of Oracles*' by first inquiring generally into who Plutarch was, what he did, what he wrote about and what influenced him to do so. In an attempt to responsibly frame *De Defectu oraculorum* in the period it was written an understanding of how Plutarch alone views oracles will not be sufficient but it is also necessary to consider how oracles would have been perceived more broadly; being a priest for the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, a philosopher and politician (and thus an 'elite' member of society), and more specifically a philosopher of middle-Platonism, Plutarch's unique position is fully expressed in his work. Thinking outside of Plutarch's perspective will aid in understanding his more clearly – to do so several secondary sources are consulted. Particularly Kennedy (2003) and Athanassaidi (1992) regarding public oracle perception and their general social role in 1st to 2nd century Greco-Roman society. Stuart (2013) and Perrin (2013) introduce Plutarch's general life and works, and Dillon (2002), Simonetti (2017) and Frank (2023) provide insight into Plutarch's view of the oracle and divination through critical review of *De Defectu oraculorum*, thoroughly discussing his brand of platonic philosophy (and thus metaphysic and ontology) and what that might tell us about his hopes for the future and intentions in writing the treatise. In conjunction with an overview of the work in question, its literary style, genre and over-all makeup, a general and fair critique can be

formed with direction for future study. Outlining the foundation for that development and direction could be seen as the base objective of this critical review of *De Defectu oraculorum*.

The Life and Work of Plutarch

What can be credibly gathered of Plutarch's life is mostly from his own writings and while he was prolific as a writer and biographer he did not necessarily provide a thorough reference of time when writing of himself. Often no exact dates are given and exactly for how long Plutarch would have spent somewhere has been left to conjecture.

Plutarch of Chaeroneia lived from around 50CE to 120CE, growing up in Boeotia, a relatively peaceful town and area in a stably Roman Mediterranean world; the Pax Romana well established in the world as Plutarch experienced it. While perhaps many Greeks felt cause to hate the Romans, Plutarch showed respect, recognizing Rome's destiny that rose it to an empire and even spent several years in Rome during his abundant travels (Stuart 2013; Perrin 2013). Plutarch's philosophical education began amongst other students in Athens under a master named Ammonius. Afterwards he traveled to Egypt, Alexandria it would seem, to pursue Graeco-Egyptian lore and the wisdom of the Egyptians. His travels there would inspire his treatise on Isis and Osiris found later in his '*Moralia*', thought to be one of his earlier works. It is unknown how long Plutarch stayed in Egypt because it is never mentioned what age he was when he left, but he would go on to return home from Alexandria and later journey to Italy and Rome to occupy himself with antiquarian researches and 'the delivery of lectures on philosophical and other subjects, a common practice among the learned Greeks of his day' (Stewart 2013, 6020). From what can be gathered for certain about his time in Rome we know that he never perfected his Latin though was very familiar with Roman literature, his antiquarian researches were part of his later biographical/philosophical work, *Lives*, and we can make

conjecture that many of his lectures were recast and included under his other later philosophical work '*Moralia*', the one in which the primary object of our consideration '*De Defectu oraculorum*' is contained amongst several other short treatises. Supposedly Plutarch was drawn to Rome by some very respectable friends, some of whom are deep features in the Roman-Greek parallels that '*Lives*' is famous for. Aside from being a writer and lecturer in Rome for some years we know little of his travels in Italy though after spending some (likely) few years in Rome he was honorably welcomed back to Greece and spent the remainder of his days there piously and prestigiously serving public office as a priest of the oracle of Apollo at Delphi and working on his greatest works – '*Lives*' and '*Moralia*'.

It is during this time serving as priest for the oracle and being closely involved in the divinatory process there that Plutarch reconciled his platonic philosophy, philosophical goals and religious beliefs and expressed them in his '*Moralia*'. It is this reconciliation that seems to culminate in '*De Defectu oraculorum*' where Plutarch chiefly addresses what he has observed and perceives to be a 'drying out of the supernatural' (Athassiadi 1992, 45), particularly of public oracular use and explains the philosophical value (and uniqueness) of oracular divination and space; seeking to philosophize with the practice and position it in contrast with other popular platonic ideas about divination, perhaps hoping to revitalize it with philosophic reinforcement and propose a continuation on philosophical grounding in the face of surmounting obsolescence (Frank 2023; Kennedy 2003; Simonetti 2017).

Public Function of Oracular Divination and Plutarch

In order to illustrate how Plutarch, with his philosophical roots steeped in Platonism, sees oracular divination and divination in general, we need to frame it in the context of the layman, who would not be deeply involved in the oracular processes nor likely be a philosopher and

writer by trade, in the prestigious learned class of 2nd century Graeco-Roman society (Dillon 2002, 32).

For the layman in Plutarch's time going to see an oracle, for instance the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, an experience that harkens on an earlier age would have unfolded where they may receive supernatural suggestion from Apollo interpreted through his mantic instrument, the priestess and oracle, who via his gases from a fissure at Delphi 'would come to the priestess, inspiring and sometimes unifying with her at the moment of consultation' (Kennedy 2003, 16). The oracle in this case as is often the case (though not always of course), is seen as a pure, fine tuned instrument, uniquely prepared and tuned to divine knowledge from a particular deity and tied to a particular place (Kennedy 2003, 16). Plutarch reflects this idea in his *De Pythiae Oraculis* and it does seem to be the general perception. Plutarch's insider philosophic contemplation afforded him by his learned and generous upbringing, travels and role as priest for the oracle of Apollo will be where Plutarch's understanding of the oracle differs from that of the layman – who again would not be familiar with Socratic daemonological theory concerning ones personal daemon (and intellect) that Platonic philosophers might have compared oracular divination with (Dillon 2002; Frank 2023; Plutarch in *Moralia*; Simonetti 2017, 175). Clearly for Plutarch the oracle is a core feature in his philosophical thought and pious consideration (Simonetti 2017, 174-175); to the layman this whole oracular process would likely strictly be concerning less philosophical inquiries not pertaining to ontology and phenomenology, but usually on matters such as marriage, a voyage, taking a loan and other 'mundane' issues (Kennedy 2003, 17). That is to say that for these men and women a more social memory view and understanding of these methods of attaining divine knowledge would be taken for an aspect of every day life – these aspects of their life are officiate in matters of polis and government,

spiritually validated culturally and historically. Indeed even needing to be ‘true’ was not a remarkable feature of their importance; they were a matter of human interpretation (though ‘properly’ provided by trained and respected individuals) and the gods are already cryptic in their deliverance of their messages through the pure, admirable if not revered oracle, thought to be ‘closer to the gods than normal people’ (Kennedy 2003, 18, Simonetti 2017). To many everyday people in the 2nd century Graeco-Roman world, the prestigious oracle was the go-to ‘holy man’ for everyday advice that had been increasingly monopolized by the state and distanced from that once highly prominent position leading up to the point of Plutarch’s observations as a priest of many years for the oracle at Delphi (Kennedy 2003). It is however worth pointing out that history suggests Plutarch spoke too soon and that the popularity of oracular divination was about to spike from that point into the middle 4th century (Athanassiadi 1992; Simonetti 2017, 59). As to whether or not that could have been instigated by Plutarch’s additions to the platonic heritage, that will not be explored here.

De Defectu oraculorum

The Source Material

Written at the end of the 1st century, while piously working at Delphi Plutarch would have seen the restoration of the Delphic shrine in the middle 1st century and another eventual (apparently worrying to Plutarch) decline in activity. Plutarch's dialogue intends to prevent the 'oracular crisis', that is, their obsolescence, from destroying 'human belief in the existence of the deity, and in its providential and beneficent character' as Simonetti puts it in the opening of their analysis of *De Defectu oraculorum* (Simonetti 2017, 59). Seemingly it is a sort of plea for the philosophical relevance and argument for the continuation of oracular practice with a demonological hypothesis (Simonetti 2017, 60-61); I suggest one might even stage it as an argument for proper ritual practice in Platonism with a cosmology leaning on Plato's *Timeus*, indeed Plutarch's Platonist perennialist position is prominent in his argument.

To posit his argument Plutarch took a classic approach for philosophical argumentation by orchestrating a dialogue between a two philosophers, in which Plutarch's brother Lamprius (who may be construed to represent Plutarch's own ideas) is narrating to Trentius Priscus about a series of characters all but one of whom are reverent religious men and each have turns in the dialogue. His brother Lamprias illustrates the 'crisis' and has a disagreement with Didymus who is not religious and is distinctly cynical, harking that the deity is resentfully punishing human wickedness. Lamprius illustrates Plutarch's argument that there is 'an ontological distance between god and humans' and that the deity therefor cannot be 'reduced to a rigid cause-effect scheme' that 'prevents any direct causal relations between their respective choices and actions', that god is transcendent and 'divine providence will show its benevolent character' providing everything with or without divination (Simonetti 2017, 63-64). It is at this point that Didymus

leaves the gathering and seemingly exemplifies Plutarch's idea of how not to conduct philosophical conversation, with cynicism. There are more characters still, including Philip, who accounts for the mortality of daemons (active spiritual agents akin to mediators for the supreme principle of the cosmos, *noesis*; a common element in middle-Platonic streams of thought) by describing the consequences of the disappearance of a divine being, presumably a daemon, witnessed by someone else on a journey undertaken for the emperor, including meteorological signs and omens. Phillip is backed up by Demetrius who tells a myth of the death of Pan, further illustrating that unlike god the daemons are not immortal, accounting for the disappearing of oracular prophecy. In the dialogue we also meet Cleombrotus and Ammonius as Cleombrotus testifies of a Pythagorean barbarian with in depth Hellenistic knowledge and an account of a perpetual lamp that burns less and less oil every year – to which all the other philosophers suggest various philosophical hypotheses and metaphysical rationale, such as the progressive shortening of the years length, while Ammonius concludes with a prudent and highly rational scientific explanation, questioning the conditions of the room the lamp is contained in, etc. – essentially emphasizing methodological caution and physical-scientific investigation foremost to explain earthly phenomena (Simonetti 2017, 72-73).

Amongst others no doubt at least two aspects of this can be taken together to depict a coherent argument – Plutarch's scientific investigation and careful methodology with a strong religious spirit concerning the supreme immortal deity is underlining the mortality of the daemon as a factor in the withering of divination as Plutarch is perceiving it while stressing the importance of careful philosophical and prudent scientific investigation of phenomena. So his arguments and platonic philosophy and cosmology are carefully investigated and support his

explanation of the ‘oracular crisis’ while aiming to protect human belief in the existence of the deity.

In *De Defectu oraculorum* Plutarch employs a dialogic style of writing convincing philosophical arguments and introduces multiple characters who engage in philosophical banter to reach philosophical points. The nature of the treatise being philosophical suggests that his target audience is likely to be the learned class familiar with Plato’s *Timaeus* who might be receptive to his ideas concerning god, daemons and the oracle. This style of literary discourse as a modality for philosophical enquiry is prevalent by Plutarch’s day having been made famous in the hands of Plato (amongst others no doubt) whose philosophical dialogues are the building blocks so-to-speak of Plutarch’s own philosophical approach which we see at the heart of his inquiry into and observations of the oracular process. To readers of Plutarch this style of philosophical deliberation would be well known and welcome, allowing the author to express their ideas in argumentation while making ample esoteric suggestion through the humorous wit of their characters, expressing philosophical depth without putting oneself entirely on the line. As we see his characters first defend god from the irreverence of Didymus before carefully, through the other characters, developing a philosophical rationale for the decline of oracles supported by middle-Platonist ideas – but first affirming their view of the supreme first principle and noesis, divine providence as having a benevolent character, not as abandoning humanity somehow or being spiteful (Simonetti 2017; 60).

The Oracular Process

Plutarch illustrates his philosophical hypothesis for how oracular divination functions by drawing comparison to daemonological theory and effectively showcasing that the two can both make sense and function. In doing so he cautiously (while keeping them distinct with his careful

rather scientific methodology) pulls religion into the sphere of philosophy as a source for esoteric and philosophic truths.

Plutarch's 'double causation' comes from his unique interpretation of Plato's *Timeus* essentially outlining the perfect primary principle (god) who are sort of knowledge or noesis itself and the demiurge that molds the cosmos, putting the forms into neutral imperfect matter and so on (to put it over simplistically), as the second cause. Plutarch via his character Cleombrotus draws on Xenocrates' demonology to posit the cosmic beings created by the demiurge as demigods (daimones), which serve the gods as mediators between the divine and humanity, as their 'interpreters, ministers and helpers' (Frank 2023, 15; Simonetti 2017, 82). These daimones, as pointed out earlier, are regarded as mortal with human-like traits and feelings, and are thus capable of dying or leaving (to other worlds for example) – hence the issue being addressed in the treatise under discussion. They are responsible for the transmission of the gods, who are so ontologically distant, by way of a receptacle such as the oracle at Delphi. Since the supreme principle is unfathomable and transcendent, a daemon must enter a receptacle, some select few humans who's temperament can balance that of the daimones, and provide a state of noesis – a state of perfect, divine, knowledge not usually accessible to those of the imperfect material nature. These humans are, to Plutarch, prophets, seers and poets, and can touch upon noesis when a daemon essentially inspires them to do so, as they are 'material' agents that are 'employed as living instruments' by the gods and their daimones (Simonetti 2017, 79) and directly act as intermediary, transmitter for the pure divine knowledge; interconnecting the transcendent god and the created cosmos (Simonetti 2017, 78). Of course such perfect transcendent knowledge must be heard and interpreted by imperfect beings (ontologically); true

knowledge will thus not necessarily be attainable for human beings, there-in lying Plutarch's role and philosophical aim as priest at Delphi: to get as close as he can to truth.

It is worth pointing out that the extensive use of daimones as deliberated by Lamprius in the dialogue is where Plutarch uniquely blurs the boundaries between the demonological theory behind regular divination where one divines information from their own daemon for philosophical purposes, and the demonology now positioned behind the oracle where we see the oracle as an instrument for the expression of the gods via the daimones, linking the divine and human worlds (Simonetti 2017). In this way philosophy and religion are both aiming for noesis and are coherently incorporated, not fundamentally at odds. Developing a view of the oracle, Delphi, the gods and philosophical endeavor under one roof is seemingly central in Plutarch's intentions for writing *De Defectu oraculorum*.

Conclusion

Initially this paper sought to critically review *De Defectu oraculorum* by contextualizing the dialogue in a broader framework; attempting to illustrate its uniqueness and more subtle aims and intentions in contrast with more common modes of thought regarding oracles in the 2nd century CE. While having to give a broad and perhaps overly simplified account of Plutarch's life and beliefs, Plutarch's ideas as he expresses them in *De Defectu oraculorum* are filtered from common thought regarding the oracles and the uniqueness of the treatise emphasized. It seems likely that after years of philosophizing over the oracle and observing in the capacity of his esteemed priestly duties he did not wish to see the practice disappear, and even saw profound application of the practice for philosophical purposes – endeavoring to shorten the distance between Delphi and his noble philosophical quest. Seeing as how oracular practice as well as philosophy continued and even became more popular in the coming centuries after his death, it

may be that Plutarch was quite successful in his arguments as it is no secret that his works have held popularity and enjoyed some fame throughout the ages, though for many different reasons no doubt. To strengthen this review I would propose a more in depth and expansive analysis of divination as held in Socratic dialogue involving daemonology and the cosmological foundations of Plutarch's Platonism involving double causation and its implications for inspired oracular divination as he sees it. Expanding on these could strengthen the argument for Plutarch's goals and intentions to avoid 'oracular crisis' and otherwise as proposed in this review.

Works Cited

- Athanassiadi, P. (1992). 'Philosophers and Oracles: Shifts of Authority in Late Paganism.' *Byzantion*, 62, 45–62.
- Dillon, J. (2002). 'The Social Role of the Philosopher in the Second Century AD: Some Remarks.' In: Stadter, P. A. & van der Stockt, L. (Ed.), *Sage and Emperor: Plutarch, Greek Intellectuals, and Roman Power in the Time of Trajan*, Leuven University Press, Leuven.
- Frank, R. A. (2023). 'The Didactic Oracle', *Mnemosyne* (published online ahead of print 2023)
- Kennedy, L. (2003). 'The End of Oracles,' *Ephemeris*: Vol. 3, Article 6.
- Perrin, B. (2103). 'Complete Works of Plutarch,' *Delphi Classics (Illustrated)*. Delphi Classics (Parts Edition). (6017-6018)
- Plutarch. 'The Obsolescence of the Oracles' in *Moralia*. with an English Translation by. Frank Cole Babbitt. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press. London. William Heinemann Ltd. 1936. 5. (348-501)
- Simonetti, E. G. (2017). 'A Perfect Medium?: Oracular Divination in the Thought of Plutarch'. Leuven University Press.
- Stewart, A. (2013). 'Complete Works of Plutarch,' - *Delphi Classics (Illustrated)*. Delphi Classics (Parts Edition). (6019-6025)