

PLUTARCHIAN PRAXIS

THE ART OF DAILY DECISION WITH
WISDOM FROM PLUTARCH'S MORALIA

merged with Abraham Wald's
Optimal Statistical Decision Theory



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Abstract

This monograph constructs a systematic framework for daily decision-making grounded in the twenty-six ethical essays of Plutarch's *Moralia*. Drawing on texts composed in the first and second centuries AD, we identify in Plutarch not merely a moral philosopher of antiquity but a rigorous analyst of the decision environment: the inner psychological economy from which choices emerge, the social field within which they are made, and the relationship between character, habit, and the quality of action over time.

The monograph is organized in four Parts. *Part I* establishes the foundations of the Plutarchian decision-maker: the formation of judgment through education, the architecture of virtue as a decision platform, and the practitioner's obligation of self-assessment. *Part II* examines the inner economy of decision: the baseline conditions of tranquillity (*ataraxia*), the regulation of anger, the dual pathology of excessive curiosity and excessive shyness, and the corrupting role of talkativeness in deliberation. *Part III* maps the social field of choice: the critical problem of distinguishing genuine counsel from flattery, the paradoxical informational value of enemies, and the network properties of friendship. *Part IV* addresses the outer boundary of decision: fortune, uncertainty, and the integration of the examined life as a standing decision system.

Each chapter extracts formal axioms, propositions, and corollaries from Plutarch's arguments, rendering his practical wisdom in a structure amenable to modern decision theory without sacrificing the richness of its ancient context. A synthesizing chapter closes the monograph by assembling a unified *Plutarchian Praxis*: ten principles for the daily exercise of practical wisdom.

Keywords: Plutarch, *Moralia*, decision theory, practical wisdom, *phronesis*, character, virtue ethics, daily praxis, *eudaimonia*.

JEL: D81, D91, Z10

*For all who must decide before they are ready—
which is to say, for all of us.*

*“The mind alone flourishes in age; and while time takes away
everything else, it adds wisdom to old age.”*

Plutarch, On Education

Contents

Preface	15
I Foundations of the Deciding Mind	17
1 The Education of Judgment	19
1.1 The Decision-Maker as a Cultivated Being	19
1.2 Habit as the Infrastructure of Choice	21
1.3 The Role of Effort and the Rejection of Fatalism	22
1.4 Education as Immortal Possession	23
2 Virtue as the Architecture of Choice	25
2.1 Can Virtue Be Learned?	25
2.2 The Three-Part Soul and the Architecture of Decision	26
2.3 Virtue and Vice as Stable Attractors	28
2.4 The Triadic Structure of Virtue	29
3 The Self-Monitoring Decision-Maker	31
3.1 Progress as a Measurable Process	31
3.2 False Progress and Self-Deception	33

3.3	The Practice of Self-Examination	34
II	The Inner Economy of Decision	35
4	The Baseline: Contentedness as a Decision Platform	37
4.1	The Essay and Its Stakes	37
4.2	The Sources of Discontent and Their Remedies	38
4.3	Contentedness and the Present Moment	39
5	The Governance of Anger	41
5.1	Anger as a Decision Pathology	41
5.2	The Temporal Window of Intervention	42
5.3	Anger and Relationship Capital	43
6	Curiosity, Shyness, and the Information Problem	45
6.1	Two Pathologies of Information-Seeking	45
6.2	The Proper Scope of Inquiry	46
6.3	The Courage of Inquiry	47
7	Deliberation and the Pathology of Talkativeness	49
7.1	Speech as a Cognitive Resource	49
7.2	The Structural Incompatibility of Talkativeness & Good Judgment	50
III	The Social Field of Decision	53
8	Discerning the Flatterer from the Friend	55

8.1	The Longest Essay and Its Central Problem	55
8.2	The Identifying Characteristics of the Flatterer	56
8.3	The Friend as Decision Asset	58
9	The Enemy as Information Source	59
9.1	The Paradox of Adversarial Information	59
9.2	The Virtue of Enemy-Management	61
10	Networks of Friendship and Decision Quality	63
10.1	The Quantity-Quality Tradeoff	63
10.2	Friendship as Decision Infrastructure	64
IV	Fortune, Time, and the Examined Life	67
11	Fortune, Uncertainty, and Robust Choice	69
11.1	Plutarch's Account of Fortune	69
11.2	The Stoic Hedge Revisited	70
11.3	The Timing of Decision under Fortune's Uncertainty	70
12	On Exile, Loss, and the Portability of Judgment	73
12.1	Exile as a Decision Extreme	73
12.2	Reframing Loss as Scope Clarification	74
13	The Examined Life as a Decision System	77
13.1	Integration: The Plutarchian Life as a Standing Protocol . . .	77
13.2	The Integrated Decision Cycle	78
13.3	The Unity of the Plutarchian System	79

11

V	The Waldian Architecture of Plutarchian Decision Theory	81
14	The Formal Setup: A Waldian Grammar for Plutarch	83
14.1	Why Wald?	83
14.2	The Six Primitive Elements and Their Plutarchian Interpretations	84
15	Risk Decomposition and Its Plutarchian Remedies	89
15.1	The Four-Component Decomposition	89
15.2	Character Risk: Systematic Bias of Settled Disposition . . .	90
15.3	Affective Risk: Variance Inflation by Unregulated Emotion .	91
15.4	Social Risk: The Cost of Biased Counsel	91
16	Admissibility, Minimax, and the Virtue of Robustness	93
16.1	Admissibility: Virtue as the Dominant Strategy	93
16.2	The Minimax Criterion: Robustness to Adversarial Fortune .	95
16.3	Bayes Risk and the Habit-Shaped Prior	96
17	Sequential Decisions, Character Dynamics, and the Value of Formation	99
17.1	Life as a Sequential Decision Problem	99
17.2	The Character Transition Function Φ	100
17.3	The Value Function and the Priority of Early Formation . . .	101
17.4	Self-Examination as a Bayesian Filtering Problem	102
18	The Complete System and the Formal Definition of <i>phronesis</i>	103
18.1	Assembly: The Integrated System	103

18.2 The Waldian Reading of Each Essay	105
18.3 The Formal Definition of <i>phronesis</i>	106
Synthesis: Ten Principles of Plutarchian Praxis	109
Bibliographic Note	113
Glossary of Greek Terms	115
List of Formal Elements	119

Preface

“Plutarch and Seneca were the only two books of solid learning he seriously settled himself to read.”

Montaigne, *Essays*

Plutarch of Chaeronea lived from approximately AD 46 to 120, a contemporary of Tacitus, Pliny, and the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius. He wrote prolifically in both biography and philosophy, leaving us the famous *Parallel Lives* and the far less celebrated *Moralia*: a collection of seventy-eight essays and dialogues ranging across education, love, friendship, exile, the control of anger, the nature of fortune, and the structure of the virtuous life.

The *Moralia* have suffered a curious historiographic fate. Where the *Lives* achieved the status of a founding text of European humanism — shaping Montaigne, Shakespeare, and the revolutionaries of 1789 alike — the ethical essays were allowed to recede. This is a loss, and the present monograph is an attempt to recover part of what has been overlooked.

What I find in the *Moralia*, reading them as a decision theorist and a student of both classical philosophy and formal methodology, is something remarkable: a comprehensive and remarkably coherent account of how a human agent, embedded in society, buffeted by passion and fortune, can nonetheless act well day after day. Plutarch is not building a system in the

manner of Aristotle or Kant. He proceeds by observation, anecdote, analogy, and precept, circling his subject the way a good physician circles a patient, gathering evidence before pronouncing. But the systematic structure is latent in his work, and it is the task of this monograph to draw it out.

The approach is as follows. Each chapter is anchored in one or more of Plutarch's essays, from which I extract the core decision-theoretic content. This content is then formalized into axioms, propositions, and corollaries — not in the spirit of false mathematical pretension, but in the spirit of clarity: forcing the argument to become explicit about its assumptions, its logical dependencies, and its practical implications. Throughout, I have tried to allow Plutarch's own voice to remain audible, quoting and paraphrasing the essays directly so that the reader can follow the thread from ancient source to contemporary formalization.

The result, I hope, is a monograph that is useful to anyone who must make decisions — which is, of course, everyone. The practical stakes are not abstract. Daily life presents us with a constant stream of choices, from the trivial to the profound, and the quality of our inner equipment for making those choices determines, in large part, the quality of our lives. Plutarch understood this with extraordinary clarity. He has much to teach us still.

Dimitrios Thomakos

Athens, April 2026

PART I

Foundations of the Deciding Mind

Chapter 1

The Education of Judgment

“A good education and sound bringing-up is of the first and middle and last importance.”

Plutarch, *On Education*

1.1 The Decision-Maker as a Cultivated Being

Plutarch opens the *Moralia* with “On Education” (*Peri Paideias*), and this ordering is no accident. Before any theory of choice, there must be an account of the agent who chooses. Plutarch’s answer is fundamentally developmental: the quality of one’s decisions is downstream of the quality of one’s formation, and formation is the product of three interlocking factors that operate across time.

Plutarch, Moralia

To speak generally, what we are wont to say about the arts and sciences is also true of moral excellence, for to its perfect development three things must meet together: natural ability, theory, and practice. By the-

ory I mean training, and by practice working at one's craft. Now the foundation must be laid in training, and practice gives facility, but perfection is attained only by the junction of all three. For natural ability without training is blind; and training without natural ability is defective; and practice without both natural ability and training is imperfect.

This is not merely a pedagogical observation. It is a claim about the structure of decision-making competence, which Plutarch sees as an *acquired capacity* rather than an innate endowment. The triad of *physis* (nature), *logos* (instruction), and *askesis* (practice) constitutes what we shall call the **Formative Triangle** of the decision-maker.

Definition 1.1 The Formative Triangle

Let $\mathcal{C}$ denote the space of character states of an agent $\mathcal{A}$. The Formative Triangle holds that $\mathcal{C}$ is a function of three co-determining factors:

$$\mathcal{C} = f(\phi, \lambda, \alpha)$$

where $\phi \in [0, 1]$ is natural endowment (*physis*), $\lambda \geq 0$ is accumulated instruction (*logos*), and $\alpha \geq 0$ is embodied practice (*askesis*). The function f is strictly subadditive: no single factor is sufficient. Perfection in $\mathcal{C}$ requires $\phi > 0$, $\lambda > 0$, $\alpha > 0$ simultaneously.

The practical implication is striking: any theory of decision improvement that focuses exclusively on one factor — training curricula without practice, or practice without reflective instruction, or confidence in raw talent without either — will be structurally incomplete. Plutarch sees this failure mode everywhere around him, in parents who choose schoolmasters carelessly, in young men who rely on natural wit, in practitioners who never submit their habits to examination.

1.2 Habit as the Infrastructure of Choice

The single most important concept in Plutarch's philosophy of decision is *hexis*: settled disposition or habit. It is not incidental that the Greek word for moral virtue, *ethike arete*, derives from *ethos*, meaning habitual practice. Virtue, for Plutarch as for Aristotle, is not a momentary state but a durable configuration of the character.

Plutarch, Moralia

For the Greek name for moral virtue is only habit: and if anyone defines moral virtues as habitual virtues, he will not be beside the mark.

The decision-theoretic import of this claim is significant. In modern decision theory, we typically treat the agent's preferences, beliefs, and utility function as given at the moment of choice. The Plutarchian account insists on the temporal depth of the decision situation: the agent who arrives at a choice moment does so carrying a configuration of settled dispositions that were formed over time, and it is *these dispositions that determine the effective choice set*, far more than the immediate deliberative episode.

Axiom 1.1 The Dispositional Priority Axiom

The effective quality of an agent's decision at time t is determined primarily by the dispositional configuration $hexis(t - \tau)$ formed over the preceding interval $[t - \tau, t)$, not merely by the deliberative process at t . Formally, if Q_t denotes decision quality at time t :

$$Q_t = g(hexis(t - \tau)) + \epsilon_t,$$

where ϵ_t is an innovation contributed by present deliberation, and g is monotone increasing. In the long run, $\mathbb{E}[Q_t]$ is dominated by the $g(\cdot)$ term.

Plutarch illustrates this with an image of extraordinary power: Lyscurgus, the Spartan lawgiver, takes two puppies from the same litter and raises them differently. Before the assembled Spartans, he releases both: one runs to the food bowl, the other to the quarry. Same origin, utterly different disposition. The parable is Plutarch's proof that environment and training transform the agent at a level deeper than conscious deliberation.

Corollary 1.1 Irreversibility of Early Formation

Because habitual configurations formed early have had more practice iterations, their entrenchment is monotone increasing in time elapsed. Plutarch writes that “everything hard is softened only with great difficulty” and that “seals are impressed on soft wax.” The cost of dispositional revision increases with age and depth of entrenchment, implying that investment in early formation dominates in expected value over correction at maturity.

1.3 The Role of Effort and the Rejection of Fatalism

A decision-theoretic hazard lurks in any emphasis on natural endowment: the fatalist inference that those poorly endowed by nature are condemned to poor decisions. Plutarch refuses this inference, and his refusal is important.

Plutarch, Moralia

Good natural parts are impaired by sloth; while inferior ability is mended by training. And while simple things escape the eyes of the careless, difficult things are reached by painstaking. Thus water continually dropping wears away rocks: and iron and steel are moulded by the hands of the artificer.

This passage encodes a doctrine of **compensatory cultivation**: the deficits of nature are, within limits, correctable by sustained effort. The images

Plutarch reaches for are hydraulic and metallurgical — processes that operate through accumulation, through the compounding of small effects over time. The decision-maker who lacks natural acuity is not excluded from excellence; she is asked to pay a higher practice cost.

Proposition 1.1 Compensatory Cultivation

Let $\phi_0 < \phi^*$ denote a below-average natural endowment. There exists a compensating training level $\lambda^*(\phi_0) > \lambda^*(\phi^*)$ and practice intensity $\alpha^*(\phi_0) > \alpha^*(\phi^*)$ such that $f(\phi_0, \lambda^*(\phi_0), \alpha^*(\phi_0)) = f(\phi^*, \lambda^*(\phi^*), \alpha^*(\phi^*))$. Plutarch's claim is that this compensating pair always exists for $\phi_0 > 0$: no agent with any natural endowment whatsoever is precluded from reaching excellence by training alone.

1.4 Education as Immortal Possession

Plutarch closes “On Education” with a hierarchy of goods that constitutes a fundamental value ordering for his entire ethical project. Noble birth, wealth, beauty, health, strength — all are praised and all are diminished. Only education (and through it, the virtuous character it produces) is described as “immortal and divine.”

Plutarch, Moralia

Education is of all our advantages the only one immortal and divine. And two of the most powerful agencies in man's nature are mind and reason. And mind governs reason, and reason obeys mind; and mind is irremovable by fortune, cannot be taken away by informers, cannot be destroyed by disease, cannot have inroads made into it by old age.

The word “immortal” here is not hyperbole. Plutarch means that education — unlike all other goods — is not subject to the volatility of fortune. It cannot be seized, taxed, stolen, or eroded by time. This makes it, in the

decision-theoretic sense, the most robust asset a person can hold: its value is invariant across the widest range of states of the world.

The Robustness Principle of Education

Let W_i denote world-state i and $V(a, W_i)$ the value of asset a in state W_i . Plutarch's claim is that for cultivated character $a = \mathcal{E}$ (education):

$$\min_i V(\mathcal{E}, W_i) \gg \min_i V(a', W_i) \quad \text{for all other assets } a'.$$

The educated mind is the maximin-optimal investment under the full distribution of life's contingencies, including war, exile, poverty, illness, and social disgrace.

Chapter 2

Virtue as the Architecture of Choice

“Virtue is a thing one can be taught.”

Plutarch, *That Virtue May Be Taught*

2.1 Can Virtue Be Learned?

The essay “That Virtue May Be Taught” (*Ei didakton he arete*) is one of the shortest in the *Moralia* and one of the most consequential. Its opening gambit is to draw out the implications of daily practice: we hire teachers for our children in reading, music, athletics, and the arts; why, Plutarch asks, should we suppose that the one thing most important to life — the capacity to act rightly — is exempt from instruction?

Plutarch, Moralia

If you ask any person who is learning to play the harp, or to study geometry, or to work in arithmetic, “Who taught you?” they will name a teacher. But if you ask those who are supposed to be pursuing virtue, “Who taught you virtue?” they will be at a loss for an answer.

The argumentative structure here is a *reductio*. If virtue cannot be taught, then we have no basis for praising the virtuous person over the wicked one, since neither chose their nature. But we do praise and blame, and rightly so. Therefore, virtue is within the domain of cultivation.

Axiom 2.1 The Teachability of Virtue

Moral excellence is not a fixed endowment distributed at birth but a capacity that can be developed, instructed, practiced, and refined over time. The decision-making quality of any agent is therefore an endogenous variable, subject to improvement through deliberate intervention. No agent is constitutively incapable of improvement.

This axiom has profound implications for any institution concerned with decision quality: military academies, intelligence communities, professional schools, organizations of all kinds. The Plutarchian view implies that investing in the moral and intellectual cultivation of decision-makers is not a soft addendum to technical training but its indispensable foundation.

2.2 The Three-Part Soul and the Architecture of Decision

In “On Moral Virtue” (*Peri ethikes aretes*), Plutarch develops his most systematic account of the psychological structure underlying choice. Following the broad Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, he distinguishes between the rational and the non-rational parts of the soul, but his emphasis falls on their interaction rather than on the dominance of one over the other.

Definition 2.1 The Bipartite Decision Architecture

The Plutarchian agent operates through two mutually influencing systems:

- (i) **Reason** (*logos*): the deliberative faculty capable of evaluation, in-

ference, and the formulation of principles.

- (ii) **Passion** (*pathos*): the motivational and affective faculty that supplies urgency, direction, and energy to action.

Good decision-making is not the elimination of *pathos* by *logos*, but the **harmonious ordering** of both — what Plutarch calls *metriopatheia*: the moderation of passion, not its suppression.

This is an important departure from a certain caricature of ancient ethics as demanding the elimination of feeling. Plutarch is emphatic: the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* (passionlessness) is neither achievable nor desirable. What is achievable, and what constitutes the target state for the Plutarchian decision-maker, is the governance of passion by reason — reason shaping the passions, the passions giving reason something to work with.

Plutarch, Moralia

The Stoics seem to err greatly on this point, in maintaining that passion is not distinct from reason, but only a certain turn and change of reason itself, and that there is only one faculty in man, which is sometimes called passion and sometimes reason. But emotion and reason are distinct in their nature, and passion is not the slave of reason, but has its own force and impulse; it can be trained and moderated, but not extinguished.

Proposition 2.1 The Moderation Proposition

Let $\rho \in [0, 1]$ denote the degree of rational governance and $\pi \in [0, 1]$ the intensity of passion. Decision quality Q is:

$$Q(\rho, \pi) = \rho \cdot h(\pi) - c(\rho, \pi),$$

where $h(\pi)$ is the motivational force supplied by passion (positive but subject to diminishing returns), and $c(\rho, \pi)$ is the cost of internal conflict between the two systems. Q is maximized at an interior solution (ρ^*, π^*) with $\pi^* > 0$: the optimal decision-maker is *not* passionless.

2.3 Virtue and Vice as Stable Attractors

The essay “On Virtue and Vice” (*Peri aretes kai kakias*) is brief but structurally decisive. Plutarch’s central claim is that virtue and vice are not opposite ends of a spectrum across which the agent drifts randomly, but *stable attractors*: once a character has organized itself around one, it becomes self-reinforcing.

Plutarch, Moralia

The soul that has caught the disease of vice straight away boils over with desires, is inflamed with passions, and is never free from anxiety and perturbation. Whereas the virtuous character is steady, calm, and composed.

Axiom 2.2 The Attractor Axiom

Let $\mathcal{C}_V$ and $\mathcal{C}_W$ denote the character basins of virtue and vice respectively, with $\mathcal{C}_V \cup \mathcal{C}_W = \mathcal{C}$. Once an agent’s character state enters $\mathcal{C}_V$ (resp. $\mathcal{C}_W$), subsequent decisions tend to reinforce and deepen that configuration. Formally, if $c_t \in \mathcal{C}_V$, then $\Pr(c_{t+1} \in \mathcal{C}_V \mid c_t) > \Pr(c_{t+1} \in \mathcal{C}_V \mid c_t \notin \mathcal{C}_V)$. This implies that early decisions about character are disproportionately consequential.

The practical implication is sobering: it is much easier to maintain virtue than to recover it once lost, and much easier to avoid vice than to escape it once established. Plutarch is not fatalistic about this — he believes in the

possibility of moral reversal — but he is realistic about the costs.

2.4 The Triadic Structure of Virtue

Across the *Moralia*, Plutarch consistently articulates virtue in terms of three integrated components: cognitive (right judgment), affective (right feeling), and behavioral (right action). The unity of virtue consists in the alignment of all three.

The Triadic Structure of Virtue

For a given decision domain, virtue V is constituted by:

$V_{\text{cognitive}}$ = accurate perception and sound judgment (*phronesis*)

$V_{\text{affective}}$ = appropriate feeling (*metriopatheia*)

$V_{\text{behavioral}}$ = consistent right action (*praxis*)

Full virtue requires $V_{\text{cognitive}} \wedge V_{\text{affective}} \wedge V_{\text{behavioral}}$. Any two without the third produces a characteristic deficiency: right action without right feeling is servility; right feeling without right judgment is well-meaning confusion; right judgment without right action is mere cleverness.

Chapter 3

The Self-Monitoring Decision-Maker

*“We must observe those that are making progress in virtue,
and judge by their actions and demeanour.”*

Plutarch, *On One’s Progress in Virtue*

3.1 Progress as a Measurable Process

The essay “How One May Be Aware of One’s Progress in Virtue” (*Pos an tis aisthanoito heautou prokoptontos ep’ arete*) treats moral development as an observable process subject to empirical tracking. This is a methodologically modern idea dressed in ancient language: the decision-maker is not merely to act virtuously but to *monitor* her progress toward virtue as a standing commitment.

Plutarch, Moralia

He that makes progress in virtue must not conceal it from himself, nor must he think he has advanced when he has not; but he must observe the signs of progress carefully, and judge whether his love of praise

has diminished, whether he is less moved by the opinion of the crowd, whether he can endure disagreeable truths about himself.

Plutarch proposes a set of behavioral indicators for genuine progress — what we would today call *behavioral proxies* for an internal state that is not directly observable. The list is revealing:

- a. Reduced susceptibility to flattery and the opinion of the crowd.
- b. Increased tolerance for self-critical truths.
- c. Reduction in emotional volatility when confronted with adversity.
- d. Greater consistency between private behavior and public conduct.
- e. Growing preference for action over speech.
- f. Ability to take pleasure in the virtuous conduct of others without envy.

Definition 3.1 Virtuous Progress Indicators

Let $\Pi_t = (\pi_1^t, \pi_2^t, \dots, \pi_k^t)$ be the vector of behavioral proxies for virtue at time t , each normalized to $[0, 1]$ with higher values indicating greater virtue. The **Progress Index** is:

$$I_t = \mathbf{w}^\top \Pi_t, \quad \mathbf{w} \in \Delta^{k-1}$$

where $\mathbf{w}$ is a weight vector reflecting the relative salience of each indicator. Genuine progress requires $I_t > I_{t-\tau}$ for all sufficiently large $\tau > 0$: the trend must be positive.

3.2 False Progress and Self-Deception

Among the most psychologically penetrating passages in the *Moralia* is Plutarch's account of the *signs of false progress* — states in which the agent believes she is improving when in fact she is merely reorganizing her self-presentation. This is the ancient diagnosis of what behavioral science calls *motivated reasoning*.

Plutarch, Moralia

Some persons who begin to study philosophy are puffed up with pride, and think themselves superior to others, and look down on those around them. But this is not progress: it is merely a change in the object of vanity.

Genuine progress is distinguished from its simulacra by its effects on the *interior* rather than the *exterior* of the agent. The person making real progress becomes less concerned with appearance, not more; less competitive about reputation, not more; more attentive to the quality of her own judgment, less attentive to its public reception.

Axiom 3.1 The Interiority Axiom

Genuine moral progress is marked by increasing weight assigned to interior quality (soundness of character, consistency of judgment) relative to exterior quality (reputation, social standing, public assessment). A declining gradient $\frac{\partial}{\partial t} \frac{w_{\text{exterior}}}{w_{\text{interior}}} < 0$ is a necessary condition for authentic progress.

3.3 The Practice of Self-Examination

Plutarch's most concrete recommendation for tracking progress is the practice of daily self-examination — a tradition extending from Socrates through the Pythagoreans and into Stoic practice. But Plutarch's version has a distinctive character: it is not merely self-critical but *comparative across time*. The question is not “did I act rightly today?” in isolation, but “did I act more rightly today than I would have acted a year ago?”

The Plutarchian Self-Examination Protocol

At the close of each day, the practitioner poses the following questions:

- Q1. Consistency:** Were my words and actions consistent with each other and with my stated commitments?
- Q2. Affect:** Were the passions that accompanied my decisions proportionate to the situations that provoked them?
- Q3. Dependence:** How much was my behavior determined by the presence or judgment of others? Did I act differently in public versus private?
- Q4. Trend:** In what respects did I act better (or worse) than I would have acted previously?
- Q5. Horizon:** What evidence of genuine progress (or regress) can I identify in today's conduct?

The protocol is not a guilt-generation mechanism but a calibration instrument. Its output is a state-estimate $\hat{c}_t$ of one's current character configuration.

PART II

The Inner Economy of Decision

Chapter 4

The Baseline: Contentedness as a Decision Platform

*“We ought not to seek happiness in external circumstances,
but rather to draw it from within.”*

Plutarch, *On Contentedness of Mind*

4.1 The Essay and Its Stakes

“On Contentedness of Mind” (*Peri euthymias*) is among the longest and most fully developed essays in the ethical *Moralia*, and it occupies a structurally pivotal position in any Plutarchian decision framework. Its thesis is that the quality of all decisions is partially determined by the baseline affective state of the decision-maker: an agent in a state of chronic discontent will make systematically worse decisions than one who has achieved a durable equilibrium of *euthymia* — contentedness or good cheer.

This is not a claim about happiness in the hedonic sense. Plutarch is careful to distinguish *euthymia* from pleasure, from good fortune, and from the absence of hardship. Contentedness is an *interior achievement*, a relation-

ship to one's own mind that remains stable across the fluctuations of external circumstances.

Plutarch, Moralia

As those who are sick in body are pleased with nothing — neither with wine, nor food, nor spring, nor gold — but when the illness takes a turn for the better they are pleased with everything, so those who are in a discontented state of mind find fault with everything, even with those things which seem to others most pleasurable and desirable.

Definition 4.1 Euthymia as Decision Baseline

Let $B_t \in \mathbb{R}$ denote the affective baseline of an agent at time t , with $B_t = 0$ representing neutrality, $B_t > 0$ contentedness, and $B_t < 0$ discontent. The **Baseline Theorem** of Plutarchian praxis holds that decision quality Q_t is:

$$Q_t = Q^*(a_t) + \beta \cdot B_t + \varepsilon_t, \quad \beta > 0,$$

where $Q^*(a_t)$ is the action-level quality in the absence of affective distortion and ε_t is white noise. Sustained negative baseline systematically degrades decision quality independently of the deliberative process.

4.2 The Sources of Discontent and Their Remedies

Plutarch identifies the principal sources of chronic discontent with surgical precision. The list reads like a catalogue of the cognitive biases that behavioral economists have rediscovered in the laboratory two millennia later.

1. **The comparison trap.** We compare our condition not to what we have but to what others have, and always to those above us on any given dimension. Plutarch prescribes comparison *downward*: attend to those whose

conditions are worse before attending to those whose conditions appear better.

2. **The novelty trap.** We desire change for its own sake, imagining that any different condition would be better. Plutarch observes that those who constantly change cities, professions, and companions carry their discontentment with them. The disorder is internal, not geographical.
3. **The loss asymmetry trap.** We dwell on what we have lost or lack while taking for granted what we have. Plutarch prescribes a regular inventory of present goods: “we must not think of the things that are absent, but rejoice in and value what we have.”
4. **The fame trap.** We allow the judgment of the crowd to determine our sense of our own worth, becoming vulnerable to every fluctuation of reputation.

Proposition 4.1 The Stoic Hedge

For each good G in the agent’s portfolio, define its **robustness coefficient** $r(G) \in [0, 1]$ as the proportion of its value that survives adverse fortune. Then the expected value of the portfolio under adversity is $\sum_i r(G_i) \cdot V(G_i)$. Plutarch’s prescription — cultivate interior goods primarily — is equivalent to maximizing this expected value, since interior goods have $r \approx 1$ while exterior goods have $r \ll 1$.

4.3 Contentedness and the Present Moment

A recurring motif in “On Contentedness of Mind” is the danger of time-displacement: projecting desire into an imagined future or regret into a replayed past, at the cost of attending to what is actually present. This is, in modern terms, a time-management problem at the level of attention.

Plutarch, Moralia

The present moment always seems tedious and unimportant to those who look forward to the future, or backwards to the past. But to one who has organized his desires and is not in the grip of hopes or fears, the present is always sufficient, always fruitful.

Axiom 4.1 The Present Sufficiency Axiom

An agent whose attention is primarily directed at the present state of affairs rather than at projected futures or rehearsed pasts will systematically have better information about the actual decision situation, lower affective noise ε_t , and therefore higher expected decision quality $\mathbb{E}[Q_t]$. The present is not merely the temporal location of decision but its primary informational domain.

Chapter 5

The Governance of Anger

“Many people invoke reason when they are angry, but when they are in their right mind they do not use it.”

Plutarch, *On Restraining Anger*

5.1 Anger as a Decision Pathology

“On Restraining Anger” (*Peri aorgesias*) is one of the most practically focused essays in the *Moralia*, structured as a dialogue in which one friend reports to another how he has been working to overcome his temper. It is also, from the perspective of decision theory, the most directly relevant to the question of decision degradation under emotional states.

Plutarch’s analysis of anger as a decision pathology is remarkably complete. He identifies: its neurological character (it heats and disturbs judgment); its self-reinforcing dynamics (acting on anger increases anger); its communicative damage (it corrupts relationships that are themselves decision assets); and the temporal structure of its opportunity for intervention.

Definition 5.1 Anger as Decision Noise

Let $A_t \in [0, \infty)$ denote the intensity of anger at time t . The effect of anger on decision quality is modeled as additive noise with intensity proportional to A_t :

$$Q_t^A = Q_t^* - \kappa \cdot A_t + \delta \cdot \mathbb{I}_{[A_t > \bar{A}]},$$

where Q_t^* is the undisturbed quality, $\kappa > 0$ is the degradation coefficient, and the indicator captures the threshold effect: above intensity $\bar{A}$, anger produces discontinuous damage (the saying is used, not controlled).

5.2 The Temporal Window of Intervention

Plutarch’s most actionable insight concerns the temporal structure of anger. Unlike the Stoics, who recommend the suppression of anger before it arises, Plutarch’s practical advice operates at the moment of arousal. The key phenomenon is what he calls the “first movement” (*proton kinema*): the initial stirring of anger before it has built to full intensity.

Plutarch, Moralia

When passion first arises, it is like a fire that has just caught: it is easy to quench. But if we feed it by giving vent to it in words and actions, it grows into a great conflagration. The wise man strikes at the root of anger in its first movements.

Axiom 5.1 The Early Intervention Axiom

The cost of suppressing anger at time t_0 (first movement) is $c_0 \ll c(t_0 + \Delta)$ for any $\Delta > 0$. Because anger, like fire, is a self-amplifying process once past a critical threshold, the intervention value function is

strongly front-loaded. Plutarch's practical advice — withdraw, delay, speak softly, drink water, sit down — all operate by *creating temporal distance between arousal and response*.

Plutarch offers a specific list of behavioral interventions, each interpretable as a mechanism for interrupting the feedback loop between emotional arousal and behavioral expression:

- P1. Delay:** Never respond to a provocation immediately. Introduce a mandatory interval, however brief, between stimulus and response.
- P2. Softening:** Deliberately lower the voice and slow the pace of speech. The body's physiological state partially determines the mind's affective state, and the reverse is also true.
- P3. Reappraisal:** Ask whether the provocation is genuinely important. Plutarch observes that most of what provokes anger is, upon reflection, trivial.
- P4. Reciprocal imagining:** Consider how the other person's situation appears from their perspective. This cognitive shift dissipates the egocentric framing that anger requires.
- P5. Self-humbling:** Recall your own past errors and failures of the kind for which you are now angry at another.

5.3 Anger and Relationship Capital

Plutarch's treatment of anger is not merely about the internal state of the agent but about the damage anger inflicts on social relationships, which are, as we shall see in Part III, among the most valuable assets in any decision environment.

Proposition 5.1 The Relationship Depreciation Proposition

Let R_{ij} denote the stock of relational capital between agents i and j , accumulated over time through shared experience, trust, and goodwill. Each uncontrolled anger episode reduces R_{ij} by some amount $\delta_{ij} > 0$. Because R_{ij} is used as an input to collaborative decision-making, its depreciation directly impairs the quality of decisions requiring cooperation. The expected cost of uncontrolled anger is therefore not merely the cost of the immediate bad decision but the present discounted value of all future decisions impaired by the relationship damage.

Chapter 6

Curiosity, Shyness, and the Information Problem

“The curious man is eager to know the private affairs of his neighbours; but he neglects his own affairs, which need attention far more.”

Plutarch, *On Curiosity*

6.1 Two Pathologies of Information-Seeking

In two apparently unrelated essays — “On Curiosity” (*Peri polypragmosynes*) and “On Shyness” (*Peri dysoresias*) — Plutarch diagnoses what we would now recognize as *opposite pathologies of information-seeking behavior*. Curiosity, in Plutarch’s sense, is not the virtuous desire to learn but the compulsive desire to know what does not concern one. Shyness (*dysoresia*, perhaps better translated as bashfulness or false shame) is the refusal to seek the information one needs because doing so would be uncomfortable or socially exposing.

Both pathologies degrade decision quality: curiosity by directing atten-

tion to irrelevant information while neglecting relevant information; shyness by blocking the acquisition of information that is relevant but costly to obtain.

Definition 6.1 Curiosity as Attention Misallocation

Let Ω_{rel} be the set of information relevant to the agent's actual decisions and Ω_{irr} be the complement. The curious agent (in Plutarch's pathological sense) allocates attention $a_{\text{irr}} \gg a_{\text{rel}}$. This produces two simultaneous deficits: under-information about genuine decision problems, and over-information about others' private affairs, which generates social friction and reputational risk.

Definition 6.2 Shyness as Information Avoidance

The shy agent systematically avoids seeking information that would be useful but that requires a socially costly request (asking a question, admitting ignorance, consulting an expert, or challenging a superior). The result is systematic under-information about precisely those topics where consultation would be most valuable.

6.2 The Proper Scope of Inquiry

Plutarch's remedy for curiosity is not incuriosity but proper *direction of inquiry*: the inward turn from the private lives of others to the domain of one's own actions, character, and decisions. He calls this the Delphic prescription, alluding to the maxim "know thyself."

Plutarch, Moralia

We ought to draw the eye of the mind homeward from other people's faults and shortcomings. If we would examine our own life, our own passions and desires, our own transgressions, we should find matter enough for reflection without prying into our neighbours' affairs.

Axiom 6.1 The Scope Axiom of Inquiry

The optimal information-gathering strategy for a decision-maker allocates attention proportional to the *decision-relevance* of the information domain. Since the agent's own character, habits, and decisions are universally relevant to all her choices, whereas the private affairs of others are almost never decision-relevant, the Plutarchian prescription — turn inquiry inward — approximates the optimal attention allocation for a self-improving agent.

6.3 The Courage of Inquiry

The remedy for shyness is what Plutarch calls *parrhesia*: the freedom or courage of speech, the willingness to say and to ask difficult things. A person paralyzed by false shame will not ask the questions she needs answered, will not seek the counsel she needs, and will not admit to the ignorance she needs to remedy. In a decision environment, this is not merely a social deficiency but a structural information failure.

Plutarch, Moralia

Many people, ashamed to seem ignorant, do not ask questions that they ought to ask; and many, fearing to seem forward, do not speak truths that ought to be spoken. Thus false shame produces silence where speech is needed and speech where silence would be better.

Proposition 6.1 The Parrhesia Proposition

In any collaborative decision environment, the expected value of information available to agent i is an increasing function of her willingness to seek consultation, admit ignorance, and pose uncomfortable questions. An agent with strong *dysoresia* operates with a systematically smaller

effective information set than her equally intelligent but less shy peer. Over repeated decisions, this information deficit compounds.

Chapter 7

Deliberation and the Pathology of Talkativeness

“Those who do not know how to be silent also do not know how to speak.”

Plutarch, *On Talkativeness*

7.1 Speech as a Cognitive Resource

“On Talkativeness” (*Peri adoleschias*) is Plutarch’s most underappreciated essay from the perspective of decision theory. It is, in essence, a treatise on the *allocation of the cognitive resource of speech* between deliberation and expression. The essay’s argument is that speech and thought are in a reciprocal relationship: excessive speech consumes the interior space that deliberation requires.

Plutarch, Moralia

The talkative person cannot keep a secret, cannot maintain plans, cannot sustain a resolution; for he has emptied his deliberations into the air before they have had time to ripen into action. The consequence is that his projects always miscarry: they are spoken before they are ready.

The phenomenology is familiar to anyone who has noticed that telling a plan to another person often reduces the urgency to execute it. Plutarch's observation is of a different kind: that premature verbalization of deliberation interrupts the maturation of judgment.

Definition 7.1 Deliberative Maturation Time

Let τ_m denote the minimum time a decision problem must be held in active deliberation before the agent's judgment on it stabilizes. Premature verbalization at $\tau < \tau_m$ exposes an immature judgment to social feedback, which introduces exogenous noise into the deliberative process and often produces premature closure.

7.2 The Structural Incompatibility of Talkativeness & Good Judgment

Plutarch argues that talkativeness is not merely a social irritant but a structural incompatibility with the conditions required for good judgment. His argument runs as follows:

- (i) Good judgment requires sustained attention to a problem over time.
- (ii) Talkativeness disperses attention across multiple topics.
- (iii) Therefore, the talkative person is structurally unable to maintain the focused attention required for good judgment.

7.2. THE STRUCTURAL INCOMPATIBILITY OF TALKATIVENESS & GOOD JUDGMENT

Axiom 7.1 The Attention Concentration Axiom

Decision quality Q is an increasing function of the attention concentration index $\mathcal{H} = -\sum_k p_k \log p_k$ of the deliberative process, where p_k is the proportion of deliberative time allocated to topic k . Maximum $\mathcal{H}$ (uniform distribution across topics) implies minimum attention concentration and minimum decision quality. The talkative person maximizes $\mathcal{H}$; the prudent person minimizes it in accordance with decision priority.

Proposition 7.1 Pericles and Demosthenes as Models

Plutarch cites Pericles and Demosthenes as exemplars of deliberate restraint in speech: both frequently refused to speak in public until they were prepared. This preparation time was not mere rhetorical polish but the period of **deliberative maturation** in which the judgment on the matter in question achieved stability. Their refusal to speak extempore was a decision to protect the quality of their judgment from premature social exposure.

PART III

The Social Field of Decision

Chapter 8

Discerning the Flatterer from the Friend

“As vision requires both the object and the light, so counsel requires both the adviser and the truth.”

Plutarch, How One May Discern a Flatterer from a Friend

8.1 The Longest Essay and Its Central Problem

“How One May Discern a Flatterer from a Friend” (*Pos an tis diakrineie ton kolaka tou philou*) is the longest single essay in the *Moralia*, running to nearly fifty pages in the original edition. Its length is commensurate with the gravity of the problem Plutarch perceives: in a social world where honest counsel is rare and flattery is ubiquitous, the ability to distinguish between them is among the most consequential cognitive skills a decision-maker can possess.

Plutarch, Moralia

Flattery is a most mischievous thing for a man who, although he wants counsel and truth and frank speech above all things, receives nothing but

what is agreeable. For just as in a disease, if the patient will not allow the physician to prescribe what is beneficial but only what is pleasant, he will soon perish; so the man who always listens to flatterers will be ruined.

The decision-theoretic framing is precise: the agent needs accurate information about the quality of her decisions and character. The friend provides such information honestly; the flatterer provides systematically biased information, always in the direction most agreeable to the agent. This is a signal-extraction problem.

Definition 8.1 The Signal-Extraction Problem of Counsel

Let $s_t \in \{-1, +1\}$ be the true signal about the quality of agent i 's decision, and let m_t^j be the message delivered by adviser j . A **true friend** has $m_t^j = s_t + \epsilon_t^j$ where ϵ_t^j is mean-zero noise. A **flatterer** has $m_t^j = +1 + \eta_t^j$ regardless of s_t , i.e., the message is biased unconditionally toward the positive. The agent must infer s_t from m_t^j without knowing which type of adviser j is.

8.2 The Identifying Characteristics of the Flatterer

Plutarch devotes most of the essay to a detailed characterization of the flatterer's operational method, which is more sophisticated than simple agreement. The flatterer is a skilled mimetic strategist.

Plutarch, Moralia

The flatterer, knowing that the straightforward path is despised, does not frankly praise everything, but sometimes finds fault — with those who are absent, or with matters of no consequence — so as to gain credit for candor, in order that he may more easily deceive in matters

of importance. He is like a spy who deliberately crosses the border to appear credible.

Plutarch identifies the following diagnostic features of the flatterer:

- F1. Adaptive mimicry:** The flatterer adjusts his opinions, tastes, and positions to mirror those of the target. Unlike a true friend, who has stable views of his own, the flatterer has no fixed character.
- F2. Strategic fault-finding:** The flatterer occasionally criticizes minor matters or safe targets to appear candid, thereby purchasing credibility for his flattery on major matters.
- F3. Context-sensitivity:** The flatterer adjusts his message to the emotional state of the target: agreement when the target is confident, consolation when the target is distressed.
- F4. Absence of consistent principle:** The flatterer's past statements are incoherent because they were calibrated to successive interlocutors, not derived from stable belief.

Proposition 8.1 The Consistency Test

A reliable diagnostic for friendship versus flattery is the **temporal consistency test**: does the adviser's expressed views exhibit consistency across time and interlocutor? A true friend's views are stable because they are generated by genuine judgment. A flatterer's views are unstable because they are generated by accommodation. Formally, if $m_t^j(i)$ is adviser j 's message when speaking with agent i , then $\text{Var}(m_t^j(i))$ across i is near zero for friends and high for flatterers.

8.3 The Friend as Decision Asset

The great positive contribution of the friend, in contrast to the flatterer, is the provision of *genuine corrective information*. Plutarch describes this as *parrhesia*: the frank speech of the true friend who is willing to say what is uncomfortable because the friendship is strong enough to bear it.

Axiom 8.1 The Friend as Signal Provider

In any decision environment subject to the agent's own biases and blind spots, a true friend who possesses *parrhesia* is an information asset of the highest value. The friend provides access to the signal space S from which the agent is systematically excluded by her own perspective. The expected value of this access is:

$$\mathbb{E}[V_{\text{friend}}] = \sum_{t=1}^T \delta^t \cdot [\mathbb{E}[Q_t | s_t] - \mathbb{E}[Q_t]],$$

where δ is the discount rate and the bracketed term is the quality improvement from access to honest signals.

Chapter 9

The Enemy as Information Source

“If enemies speak ill of us, we ought to examine ourselves before we become angry at them.”

Plutarch, How a Man May Be Benefited by His Enemies

9.1 The Paradox of Adversarial Information

“How a Man May Be Benefited by His Enemies” (*Pos an tis hypo ton echthron opheloito*) presents what is, from a decision-theoretic standpoint, one of the most counterintuitive yet robust propositions in the *Moralia*: the agent’s enemies are a more valuable source of information about her actual failures than her friends, precisely because they are motivated to find and expose those failures without mercy.

Plutarch, Moralia

It is not much use if our enemies say harsh things about us for the purpose of hurting us; but we can make use of their attacks as we would of medicine. For they search out our weak points and our faults with

greater care and exactness than our friends, who are content to praise us or to pass over our failures.

This is a claim about *incentive-aligned information*. The enemy has no motive to spare the agent's feelings; her motive is to find what is genuinely criticizable, and in pursuing that motive she provides what is, in expectation, the most accurate available information about the agent's actual deficiencies.

Definition 9.1 Adversarial Signal Quality

Let σ_F^2 and σ_E^2 denote the variance of the error in signals from friends and enemies respectively, regarding the agent's actual faults. If the friend has a bias $b_F > 0$ toward positive evaluation and the enemy has a bias $b_E < 0$ toward negative evaluation, then:

$$\mathbb{E}[m_t^F - s_t] = b_F > 0 \quad (\text{friend overestimates})$$

$$\mathbb{E}[m_t^E - s_t] = b_E < 0 \quad (\text{enemy underestimates})$$

The unbiased estimate of actual fault level is therefore a weighted combination of both signals, giving positive weight to adversarial feedback.

Proposition 9.1 The Adversarial Information Proposition

An agent who receives honest criticism from an enemy and self-examines to determine whether the criticism is accurate has access to:

- (i) Information about genuine faults that friends conceal or minimize.
- (ii) A motivation structure for self-improvement that flattery cannot provide.
- (iii) A test of equanimity: if the criticism is false, bearing it without reaction demonstrates virtue; if it is true, acting on it improves the agent.

The expected informational value of adversarial criticism is therefore positive, provided the agent has the dispositional capacity to receive it without anger.

9.2 The Virtue of Enemy-Management

Plutarch goes further: he argues that the virtuous management of enemies is itself a form of character training. Every provocation by an enemy is an opportunity to practice the self-governance whose lapses the enemy seeks to exploit.

Axiom 9.1 The Enemy as Character Stress-Test

The presence of a capable enemy who monitors one's conduct and publicizes one's failures creates a *standing incentive structure* for maintained virtue. Formally, let p_t be the probability that any lapse in conduct at time t is observed and publicized by the enemy. Then $p_t > 0$ raises the effective cost of lapses and thereby increases the equilibrium level of virtue maintained. The enemy, without intending to, performs a moral auditing function.

Chapter 10

Networks of Friendship and Decision Quality

“In trying to have many friends a man ends up with none who is truly a friend.”

Plutarch, *On Abundance of Friends*

10.1 The Quantity-Quality Tradeoff

“On Abundance of Friends” (*Peri polyphiliias*) is Plutarch’s most explicitly network-theoretic essay. Its central argument is that true friendship is a scarce resource whose quality is inversely related to its quantity. The person who seeks many friends dilutes the attention and commitment available for each, producing a network of acquaintances masquerading as a network of friends.

Plutarch, Moralia

Friendship requires time, intimacy, shared experience, and the testing that comes only through adversity. One cannot maintain a large number of true friendships for the same reason that one cannot simultaneously

be intimate with many people: the resource of personal attention is finite.

Proposition 10.1 The Friendship Scarcity Proposition

Let T be the total time available for friendship maintenance and $\tau_{\min}$ the minimum time required to maintain a genuine friendship at the threshold quality q^* . Then the maximum number of genuine friendships is:

$$n^* = \left\lfloor \frac{T}{\tau_{\min}} \right\rfloor$$

For any $n > n^*$, at least some “friendships” must fall below q^* , i.e., they are acquaintanceships masquerading as friendships. Plutarch’s empirical estimate of n^* is small — perhaps two or three true friends at most.

10.2 Friendship as Decision Infrastructure

The Plutarchian analysis of friendship is not merely social; it is functional. Friends serve as advisers, informational resources, psychological stabilizers, and practical supporters across the full range of life’s decision domains. The quality of one’s friendship network is therefore a major determinant of decision quality across time.

The Friendship Decision Matrix

For a given agent, the friendship network provides four decision functions:

- F1. Information:** Friends provide honest signals about the agent’s decisions and character (the *parrhesia* function).
- F2. Deliberation:** Friends serve as thinking partners, helping the

agent to reason through complex problems before deciding.

F3. Stabilization: Friends provide affective support during adversity, maintaining the baseline contentedness (*euthymia*) from which good decisions emerge.

F4. Action: Friends provide practical assistance in the execution of decisions, including collective action that no single agent could accomplish.

A friendship network that is broad but shallow (many acquaintances) provides functions F3 and F4 at low quality and fails entirely at F1 and F2. A narrow but deep network (few true friends) provides all four at high quality.

PART IV

Fortune, Time, and the Examined Life

Chapter 11

Fortune, Uncertainty, and Robust Choice

“Fortune is fickle, reason is sure; fortune is blind, reason sees clearly.”

Plutarch, *On Fortune*

11.1 Plutarch’s Account of Fortune

“On Fortune” (*Peri tyches*) is one of the more philosophically ambitious essays in the *Moralia*. Plutarch’s position is nuanced: he neither dismisses fortune as irrelevant (the Stoic extreme) nor surrenders to it as all-determining (the popular view). Fortune exists, operates powerfully, and must be taken seriously. But virtue is not fortune’s victim; it is fortune’s proper interlocutor.

Plutarch, Moralia

Fortune is not the maker of the good man’s happiness, only its circumstance. The same storm that wrecks the poorly built vessel serves as a test for the well-built one: it proves the ship’s soundness rather than destroying it. So fortune tests the character of the man.

Definition 11.1 Fortune as External State Variable

Let $\theta_t \in \Theta$ be the state of fortune at time t , drawn from a distribution $\mathcal{F}$ not controlled by the agent. Decision outcome $O_t = O(a_t, \theta_t)$ depends jointly on the agent's action a_t and the realization of θ_t . Plutarch's claim is that:

$$\frac{\partial \mathbb{E}[O_t]}{\partial \text{Virtue}} > 0 \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{\partial^2 O_t}{\partial a_t \partial \theta_t} \geq 0,$$

i.e., virtue not only improves average outcomes but also reduces the variance-damage of adverse fortune (the virtuous agent is more *robust*).

11.2 The Stoic Hedge Revisited

Plutarch's treatment of fortune is structurally related to his account of contentedness: both converge on the strategy of investing in interior goods (character, virtue, judgment) rather than exterior goods (wealth, reputation, power) because interior goods are invariant across states of fortune.

Axiom 11.1 The Interior Invariance Axiom

For any state of fortune $\theta \in \Theta$, the value of an interior good G_I (virtue, judgment, character) satisfies $V(G_I, \theta) = v_I$ for constant v_I . The value of an exterior good G_E (wealth, power, reputation) satisfies $V(G_E, \theta)$ with $\text{Var}_\theta[V(G_E, \theta)] \gg 0$. The maximin-optimal portfolio, which minimizes worst-case loss, is therefore weighted toward G_I .

11.3 The Timing of Decision under Fortune's Uncertainty

Plutarch has a subtle treatment of the interaction between fortuitous timing and deliberate action. The concept of *kairos* — the right moment, the opportune instant — operates within his framework not as the dispensation of luck but as the outcome of patient preparation meeting the window of opportunity.

Proposition 11.1 The *kairos* Proposition

The ability to recognize and act on the *kairos* — the opportune moment — is not a gift of fortune but a product of prior cultivation. An agent with well-formed judgment, sustained attention, and developed virtue will recognize opportunities that a less cultivated agent will miss, precisely because her perceptual capacity has been sharpened through *askesis*. Fortune provides the window; virtue provides the readiness to see and enter it.

Chapter 12

On Exile, Loss, and the Portability of Judgment

“The mind is its own place, and carries within itself the conditions of happiness and misery.”

Plutarch, *On Exile*

12.1 Exile as a Decision Extreme

“On Exile” (*Peri phyges*) is Plutarch’s consolatory essay addressing the loss of home, country, community, and social position — the most extreme form of external loss that a person of the ancient world could suffer. Plutarch wrote it as a letter of consolation, and it proceeds through a remarkable inversion: what appears as utter deprivation is reframed as an opportunity for the demonstration of a fundamental truth about the self.

Plutarch, Moralia

Socrates replied, when asked to what country he belonged, “I am a citizen of the world.” He was right: for the whole world is his native country whose character is sound, and everywhere is a foreign land to those who are inwardly desolate.

The argument is structurally isomorphic with the argument of “On Contentedness of Mind”: the quality of the agent’s inner life is not determined by her outer circumstances. The person of well-formed character carries her decision-making capacity with her wherever she goes; it is not attached to particular places, networks, or positions.

Axiom 12.1 The Portability Axiom

The core decision-making assets of a cultivated agent — judgment, virtue, the capacity for contentedness, the skill of self-examination — are *location-invariant*. They are not destroyed by physical displacement, loss of social position, or deprivation of material goods. This portability is the deepest form of robustness available to a human agent.

12.2 Reframing Loss as Scope Clarification

Plutarch’s consolatory strategy in “On Exile” involves a systematic reframing of what has been lost. Each thing the exile mourns — city, friends, reputation, familiar places — is shown to be either not genuinely lost, or not genuinely a constituent of the good life, or available in equivalent form in the new location.

Proposition 12.1 The Reframing Proposition

For any loss L that appears to impair the agent's capacity to live well, there exists a reframing $R(L)$ that:

- (i) Identifies what is genuinely and irreversibly lost.
- (ii) Identifies what is not lost but merely changed in form.
- (iii) Identifies what remains intact regardless of the loss.

Systematic application of this reframing protocol typically reveals that category (iii) — the intact residue — includes the most decision-relevant assets. The Plutarchian claim is that this exercise, performed honestly, consistently produces recognition that the situation is less catastrophic than it appeared before the reframing.

Chapter 13

The Examined Life as a Decision System

“The life which is unexamined is not worth living.”

Socrates, in Plato’s *Apology* — cited by Plutarch

13.1 Integration: The Plutarchian Life as a Standing Protocol

The preceding chapters have extracted from the *Moralia* a series of discrete principles, each grounded in a specific essay. In this chapter we integrate them into a unified picture: the Plutarchian life understood as a *standing decision system* — a way of organizing one’s daily existence that continuously improves the quality of choice.

The system has three temporal scales of operation:

1. **Daily practice:** The morning orientation (setting intentions), the midday check (monitoring emotional state and attention quality), and the evening self-examination (tracking progress).
2. **Medium-term cultivation:** The building and maintenance of genuine

friendships; the management of anger through practice; the direction of inquiry inward; the disciplined restraint of unnecessary speech.

3. **Long-term formation:** The sustained investment in education, philosophical study, and the deepening of moral character as the foundational platform for all decision-making.

13.2 The Integrated Decision Cycle

The Plutarchian Daily Decision Cycle

The integrated protocol, operating on a daily basis, proceeds:

- Step 1: Orient (Morning):** Set the day's primary intentional direction. What is genuinely important today? What passions (anger, anxiety, comparison) must be pre-empted? Which relationships require attention?
- Step 2: Monitor (Throughout):** Maintain awareness of emotional baseline. Is the current affective state (*euthymia* or its absence) affecting perception and choice? Is attention directed at what is relevant or at what is merely stimulating?
- Step 3: Intervene (At Point of Decision):** Before significant choices, introduce a deliberative pause. Is this a decision that can benefit from consultation? Who is the most honest available adviser? Is there flattery in the counsel I am receiving?
- Step 4: Examine (Evening):** Apply the self-examination protocol. Was today's conduct consistent with stated values? Were passions proportionate? Did I act better or worse than I would have previously?

Step 5: Cultivate (Ongoing): Use each episode — anger managed, flattery resisted, loss reframed, adversarial criticism absorbed — as a training opportunity that deposits into the long-run *hexis* of the character.

13.3 The Unity of the Plutarchian System

What is striking, reading the *Moralia* as a systematic work rather than a collection of independent essays, is how deeply interconnected its themes are. The capacity to receive honest criticism from an enemy depends on the same equanimity (*euthymia*) developed by contentedness practice. The ability to distinguish a friend from a flatterer depends on the same attentiveness cultivated by the restraint of curiosity and talkativeness. The robustness to fortune depends on the same interior investment recommended by the education essay.

The *Moralia* constitute, in this reading, not a miscellany but a system — the system of the fully cultivated decision-maker.

PART V

The Waldian Architecture of Plutarchian Decision Theory

Chapter 14

The Formal Setup: A Waldian Grammar for Plutarch

“The mind governs reason, and reason obeys mind; and mind is irremovable by fortune.”

Plutarch, *On Education*

14.1 Why Wald?

Abraham Wald’s *Statistical Decision Functions* (1950) provides the most general formal framework for individual decision-making under uncertainty in the mathematical literature. Its power lies in its generality: the Waldian system does not presuppose a particular probability model, does not require a utility-maximizing agent, and does not assume that states of the world are enumerable in advance. It asks, at its most fundamental level, a single question: *given that an agent will face uncertainty, what constitutes an optimal rule for acting?*

This question is, at its core, Plutarch’s question. The *Moralia* does not address individual decisions in isolation but the standing *rules* by which an

agent meets all decisions: the character, habits, attentiveness, affective governance, and social intelligence that together constitute the Plutarchian practitioner. Character, in the Waldian reading, is a **decision rule** — not a momentary choice but a mapping from observations to actions, operating across the full distribution of life’s contingencies.

The formal Waldian grammar makes this correspondence precise. Each element of Wald’s framework finds a natural Plutarchian counterpart, and the correspondence is not merely analogical: it is structurally exact. The result is a complete *Waldian-Plutarchian* decision system in which the ancient philosophical categories receive rigorous mathematical content.

14.2 The Six Primitive Elements and Their Plutarchian Interpretations

Definition 14.1 The Waldian Sextet

A complete Waldian decision problem is specified by six elements:

- (i) A **parameter space** Θ : possible states of the world.
- (ii) An **action space** $\mathcal{A}$: acts available to the agent.
- (iii) A **sample space** $\mathcal{X}$: observations the agent can make.
- (iv) A **probability model** $\{P_\theta\}_{\theta \in \Theta}$: distribution of observations given each state.
- (v) A **loss function** $L : \mathcal{A} \times \Theta \rightarrow [0, \infty)$: cost of action a when true state is θ .
- (vi) A **decision rule** $\delta : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{A}$: the mapping from observations to actions.

The **risk function** associated with rule δ is:

$$R(\delta, \theta) = \mathbb{E}_\theta[L(\delta(X), \theta)] = \int_{\mathcal{X}} L(\delta(x), \theta) dP_\theta(x).$$

14.2.1 The Parameter Space: Fortune and the Social World

Definition 14.2 The Plutarchian Parameter Space Θ

The parameter space has two components:

$$\Theta = \Theta_{\text{fortune}} \times \Theta_{\text{social}},$$

where Θ_{fortune} contains all configurations of external circumstance (wealth, health, political standing, war, exile) and Θ_{social} contains all configurations of the agent's social environment (composition and quality of the network of friends, advisers, and adversaries).

Crucially, Θ is **partially adversarial**: the fortune component $\theta_{\text{fortune}} \in \Theta_{\text{fortune}}$ is not chosen by the agent but allocated by $\tau\acute{\upsilon}\chi\eta$, which Plutarch treats as indifferent to the agent's welfare. This adversarial structure motivates the minimax criterion, developed in Chapter 16.

14.2.2 The Action Space: Character as Dispositional Constraint

Definition 14.3 The Plutarchian Action Space $\mathcal{A}(\psi)$

The action space is not simply the set of physically available acts but the set of **character-consistent responses**:

$$\mathcal{A}(\psi) \subseteq \mathcal{A}_{\text{max}},$$

where $\mathcal{A}_{\text{max}}$ is the universal action space and $\mathcal{A}(\psi)$ is the character-

constrained subset. A vicious character ψ_W retains dishonest, intemperate, and impulsive acts; a virtuous character ψ_V has refined its action space through *hexis* to exclude them.

Key implication: The restriction $\mathcal{A}(\psi_V) \subset \mathcal{A}(\psi_W)$ is a *reduction in risk*, not a reduction in freedom, because the excluded acts are precisely those that generate high expected loss.

14.2.3 The Observation Model: Character as Epistemic Filter

This is the most distinctively Plutarchian contribution to the Waldian framework. In standard Wald the agent's observation quality depends only on θ . In the Plutarchian system the *quality of observation itself* depends on the agent's character.

Definition 14.4 The Character-Filtered Observation Model

Let $X_{\text{true}} \sim P_\theta$ be the uncorrupted environmental signal. The agent's **effective observation** is:

$$X_{\text{eff}} = X_{\text{true}} + \varepsilon(\psi, A_t, S_t),$$

where $\varepsilon(\psi, A_t, S_t)$ is **character noise** with three components:

ε_ψ : systematic bias from settled dispositions

(pride, envy, fear, vain self-love)

ε_{A_t} : variance-adding noise from current affective state

text(anger, anxiety, discontent)

ε_{S_t} : distortion from social environment (flatterers, friends, enemies)

A fully virtuous agent achieves $\varepsilon(\psi_V, 0, \cdot) = 0$: zero dispositional bias and zero affective noise under equanimity, with only irreducible social

noise ε_{S_t} remaining.

The entire Plutarchian programme of cultivation is, in Waldian terms, the programme of *minimizing character noise*: reducing ε_ψ through self-examination and habit formation, reducing ε_{A_t} through governance of anger and cultivation of *euthymia*, and reducing ε_{S_t} through replacement of flatterers with genuine friends.

14.2.4 The Loss Function: Virtue as the Measure of Cost

Definition 14.5 The Plutarchian Loss Function L^P

The Plutarchian loss function $L^P : \mathcal{A} \times \Theta \rightarrow [0, \infty)$ is:

$$L^P(a, \theta) = \underbrace{L_{\text{ext}}(a, \theta)}_{\text{external loss}} + \underbrace{\lambda \cdot L_{\text{int}}(a, \psi)}_{\text{character loss}}, \quad \lambda > 0,$$

where L_{ext} is damage to welfare, reputation, or relationships, and L_{int} is the degree to which action a erodes the agent's virtue configuration ψ toward the vicious basin $\mathcal{C}_W$.

The **defining feature** of the Plutarchian loss is $\lambda > 0$: character cost is always part of the true loss. An agent who achieves a favorable external outcome through a vicious act has still incurred $\lambda \cdot L_{\text{int}}(a, \psi) > 0$.

Remark

Setting $\lambda = 0$ recovers pure consequentialism (only outcomes count). Setting $\lambda \rightarrow \infty$ recovers the Stoic position (only character counts). Plutarch's ethics occupies the interior: $\lambda \in (0, \infty)$, with interior goods weighted more heavily in the well-formed agent's evaluation.

14.2.5 The Decision Rule: Character as Policy

Definition 14.6 The Character-as-Decision-Rule Identification

The agent's character configuration ψ is the decision rule:

$$\delta_\psi : \mathcal{X} \rightarrow \mathcal{A}(\psi), \quad \delta_\psi(x) = \arg \min_{a \in \mathcal{A}(\psi)} \mathbb{E}[L^P(a, \theta) \mid X_{\text{eff}} = x].$$

Character ψ determines the rule in two ways: (i) it sets the noise floor of X_{eff} through $\varepsilon(\psi, \cdot, \cdot)$, and (ii) it defines the feasible action set $\mathcal{A}(\psi)$ through dispositional *hexis*. The cultivation of virtue is therefore the optimization of the decision rule: ψ_V is the character configuration that minimizes expected loss over the full distribution of life's contingencies.

Chapter 15

Risk Decomposition and Its Plutarchian Remedies

“As in a disease, if the patient will not allow the physician to prescribe what is beneficial but only what is pleasant, he will soon perish.”

Plutarch, *How One May Discern a Flatterer from a Friend*

15.1 The Four-Component Decomposition

The total Waldian risk $R(\delta_\psi, \theta)$ decomposes into four components, each corresponding to a distinct source of decision loss identified across the *Moralia*.

Proposition 15.1 The Plutarchian Risk Decomposition

Under the Waldian-Plutarchian framework:

$$R(\delta_\psi, \theta) = R_{\text{char}}(\psi, \theta) + R_{\text{affect}}(\psi, \theta) + R_{\text{social}}(\psi, \theta) + R_{\text{fortune}}(\theta), \quad (15.1)$$

where:

- (i) $R_{\text{char}}(\psi, \theta)$: risk from dispositional biases in character — pride, envy, habitual intemperance.
- (ii) $R_{\text{affect}}(\psi, \theta)$: risk from current affective states — anger, anxiety, chronic discontent — corrupting X_{eff} .
- (iii) $R_{\text{social}}(\psi, \theta)$: risk from the social observation model — flattery, isolation from honest counsel, failure to extract adversarial information.
- (iv) $R_{\text{fortune}}(\theta)$: the irreducible component from genuine uncertainty in θ , beyond the agent's control.

The Plutarchian programme minimizes $R_{\text{char}} + R_{\text{affect}} + R_{\text{social}}$ while accepting R_{fortune} as irreducible — precisely the structure of the *Moralia*.

15.2 Character Risk: Systematic Bias of Settled Disposition

Character risk arises when settled dispositions systematically distort observations. The angry person overweights provocations; the envious person misperceives others' situations; the vain person overweights reputation signals.

Axiom 15.1 The Character Bias Axiom

For a vicious character ψ_W :

$$\mathbb{E}[X_{\text{eff}} \mid X_{\text{true}} = x, \psi_W] = x + b(\psi_W), \quad b(\psi_W) \neq 0,$$

a persistent systematic bias across all contexts and states. Therefore $R_{\text{char}}(\psi_W, \theta) > R_{\text{char}}(\psi_V, \theta)$ for all θ , with $b(\psi_V) = 0$ and $R_{\text{char}}(\psi_V, \theta) = 0$ for the fully virtuous agent.

15.3 Affective Risk: Variance Inflation by Unregulated Emotion

Unlike character bias, which is systematic, affective noise is variance-adding: it randomly corrupts observations in proportion to current emotional intensity.

Proposition 15.2 The Anger-Variance Proposition

Let A_t denote anger intensity. The observation error variance is:

$$\text{Var}(X_{\text{eff}} - X_{\text{true}} \mid A_t) = \sigma_0^2 + \kappa^2 A_t^2, \quad \kappa > 0.$$

Affective risk is strictly increasing in A_t : $\partial R_{\text{affect}} / \partial A_t > 0$ for all θ . The benefit of the Early Intervention Axiom (Chapter 5) is suppression of $\kappa^2 A_t^2$ before it inflates observation variance. Cultivating *euthymia* reduces the baseline σ_0^2 by removing the standing noise of chronic discontent.

15.4 Social Risk: The Cost of Biased Counsel

Definition 15.1 The Social Observation Aggregator

With n_F flatterers, n_E enemies, and n_T true friends, the social observation is:

$$X_{\text{social}} = \frac{1}{n_F + n_E + n_T} \left[\sum_{j=1}^{n_F} (s + b_j^F) + \sum_{k=1}^{n_E} (s + b_k^E) + \sum_{l=1}^{n_T} (s + \varepsilon_l^T) \right],$$

where s is the true signal, $b_j^F > 0$ is flatterer bias, $b_k^E < 0$ is enemy bias (they expose faults), and $\varepsilon_l^T \sim (0, \sigma_T^2)$ is friend noise. The aggregate

bias is:

$$\text{Bias}(X_{\text{social}}) = \frac{n_F \bar{b}^F + n_E \bar{b}^E}{n_F + n_E + n_T}.$$

When $n_F \gg n_T$ and $n_E = 0$, the pure-flattery network produces strongly positive bias — the most dangerous configuration.

Corollary 15.1 The Optimal Social Portfolio

Minimizing $R_{\text{social}}(\psi, \theta)$ requires:

- (i) n_T maximized subject to the friendship scarcity constraint.
- (ii) $n_E > 0$: at least one capable critic providing negatively biased signals to correct flattery drift.
- (iii) $n_F \rightarrow 0$: flatterers excluded from deliberative counsel.

This is precisely the social configuration Plutarch prescribes across three essays. The Waldian framework proves it is not only morally recommended but *strategically optimal*: it minimizes the social component of the agent's risk function.

Chapter 16

Admissibility, Minimax, and the Virtue of Robustness

“The same storm that wrecks the poorly built vessel serves as a test for the well-built one.”

Plutarch, *On Fortune*

16.1 Admissibility: Virtue as the Dominant Strategy

Definition 16.1 Admissibility

A decision rule δ_ψ is **admissible** if there exists no other rule $\delta_{\psi'}$ such that $R(\delta_{\psi'}, \theta) \leq R(\delta_\psi, \theta)$ for all θ , with strict inequality for at least one θ . An **inadmissible** rule has a free improvement available; using it is irrational in the strict Waldian sense.

Proposition 16.1 The Inadmissibility of the Vicious Rule

Under L^P , every vicious rule δ_{ψ_W} is inadmissible, dominated uniformly by δ_{ψ_V} for three independent reasons:

- (i) **Zero character loss:** $L_{\text{int}}(a, \psi_V) = 0$ for all $a \in \mathcal{A}(\psi_V)$, while $\lambda \cdot L_{\text{int}}(a, \psi_W) > 0$ adds to every loss incurred in the expanded vicious action space.
- (ii) **Zero character bias:** $b(\psi_V) = 0$ ensures unbiased observation and correct action selection; $b(\psi_W) \neq 0$ produces incorrect selections even on a fixed action space.
- (iii) **Structural exclusion of high-loss acts:** $\mathcal{A}(\psi_V)$ excludes the acts with highest L_{ext} that $\mathcal{A}(\psi_W)$ contains, preventing their selection under any observation.

Therefore $R(\delta_{\psi_V}, \theta) \leq R(\delta_{\psi_W}, \theta)$ for all θ , with strict inequality whenever the vicious rule exercises its extended or biased capacity.

Remark

This is the Waldian formalization of “On Virtue and Vice”: vice is not merely morally bad but *strategically inferior*. The vicious agent uses an inadmissible decision rule that any rational agent would exchange for a better one. Plutarch’s ethics and Wald’s rationality criterion deliver an identical verdict.

16.2 The Minimax Criterion: Robustness to Adversarial Fortune

The minimax criterion selects the rule minimizing worst-case risk:

$$\delta^{\text{MM}} = \arg \min_{\delta \in \Delta} \max_{\theta \in \Theta} R(\delta, \theta).$$

Axiom 16.1 The Adversarial Fortune Axiom

Fortune ($\tau\acute{\upsilon}\chi\eta$) is indifferent: it does not adapt to the agent's welfare. In the worst case it selects the state $\theta^* = \arg \max_{\theta} R(\delta, \theta)$ from the agent's perspective. Since Plutarch treats worst-case scenarios seriously throughout the *Moralia* — exile, war, poverty, illness, disgrace — the minimax criterion is the normatively appropriate standard for the Plutarchian decision-maker.

Proposition 16.2 The Plutarchian Minimax Theorem

Under the Waldian-Plutarchian framework with adversarial fortune, the minimax-optimal decision rule is the virtuous rule:

$$\delta_{\psi_V} = \arg \min_{\delta \in \Delta} \max_{\theta \in \Theta} R(\delta, \theta).$$

Proof sketch. By Proposition 16.1, δ_{ψ_V} dominates all non-virtuous rules uniformly, hence in particular at the worst-case θ^* . Among all admissible rules, δ_{ψ_V} achieves the minimum worst-case risk because it simultaneously has: zero character bias; zero affective noise under equanimity; zero character loss component; and the Interior Invariance property (Axiom 11.1), by which the value of interior goods is constant across all

realizations of θ_{fortune} . Therefore

$$\max_{\theta} R(\delta_{\psi_V}, \theta) \leq \max_{\theta} R(\delta, \theta) \quad \forall \delta \in \Delta. \quad \square$$

Remark

This is the formal statement of Stilpo’s reply to Demetrius after the sack of Megara: “War can make no havoc of virtue.” The content is that $\max_{\theta} R(\delta_{\psi_V}, \theta)$ is bounded even when θ_{fortune} is maximally adverse — because the irreducible $R_{\text{fortune}}(\theta)$ is the only component that fortune can reach; the three reducible components have been driven to zero by the virtuous character.

16.3 Bayes Risk and the Habit-Shaped Prior

The minimax criterion treats fortune as adversarial. The Bayesian criterion complements it: treat fortune as drawn from a prior π over Θ , with Bayes risk $r(\pi, \delta) = \int_{\Theta} R(\delta, \theta) d\pi(\theta)$. In the Plutarchian system the prior π is itself a product of character formation.

Definition 16.2 The Habit-Shaped Prior

The agent’s prior π_{ψ} over Θ is:

$$\pi_{\psi}(\theta) \propto \exp(-d(\theta, \bar{\theta}_{\psi})),$$

where $\bar{\theta}_{\psi}$ is the “expected world” from the perspective of character ψ . A vicious character generates a biased prior over-weighting states favorable to vicious acts. A virtuous character generates a well-calibrated prior through the compounding of self-examination, honest counsel, and adversarial feedback over time.

Proposition 16.3 Bayes Optimality of the Examined Life

The Bayes-optimal rule under π_{ψ_V} is δ_{ψ_V} , and:

$$r(\pi_{\psi_V}, \delta_{\psi_V}) \leq r(\pi_{\psi'}, \delta_{\psi'}) \quad \forall \psi' \neq \psi_V.$$

The virtuous agent both acts better (lower loss per observation) and perceives more accurately (well-calibrated prior), producing compounded improvements in Bayes risk relative to all other character configurations.

Chapter 17

Sequential Decisions, Character Dynamics, and the Value of Formation

“The mind alone flourishes in age; and while time takes away everything else, it adds wisdom to old age.”

Plutarch, *On Education*

17.1 Life as a Sequential Decision Problem

Life is not a single decision but a sequence $\{d_1, d_2, \dots, d_T\}$ of decisions, and the character configuration ψ_t at time t is a state variable that evolves in response to each decision made.

Definition 17.1 The Sequential Waldian-Plutarchian Problem

At each time $t = 1, \dots, T$:

- (i) World is in state $\theta_t \in \Theta$.
- (ii) Agent observes $X_t^{\text{eff}} = X_t^{\text{true}} + \varepsilon(\psi_t, A_t, S_t)$.

- (iii) Agent takes action $a_t = \delta_{\psi_t}(X_t^{\text{eff}})$.
- (iv) Agent incurs loss $L^P(a_t, \theta_t)$.
- (v) Character updates: $\psi_{t+1} = \Phi(\psi_t, a_t, \theta_t)$.

Objective: minimize total discounted loss:

$$\min_{\{\delta_t\}_{t=1}^T} \mathbb{E} \left[\sum_{t=1}^T \beta^{t-1} L^P(\delta_{\psi_t}(X_t^{\text{eff}}), \theta_t) \right], \quad \beta \in (0, 1).$$

17.2 The Character Transition Function Φ

The most distinctive feature of the sequential Plutarchian problem is that the decision rule δ_{ψ_t} is *endogenously updated by each decision taken*: character is a state variable that responds to actions.

Axiom 17.1 The Character Transition Axiom

$\Phi : \Psi \times \mathcal{A} \times \Theta \rightarrow \Psi$ satisfies:

- (i) **Virtuous attractor:** $\Phi(\psi_V, a, \theta) \in \mathcal{C}_V$ for all $a \in \mathcal{A}(\psi_V)$ and all θ . The virtuous character, acting from its proper space, is self-reinforcing.
- (ii) **Basin-crossing cost:** Exit from $\mathcal{C}_W$ to $\mathcal{C}_V$ requires specific (a, θ) pairs; moral reversal is rare and costly.
- (iii) **Habituation accumulation:** Each virtuous act deposits $\Delta\psi = \alpha(\psi_t) > 0$ toward ψ_V ; each vicious act decrements by $\gamma(\psi_t) > 0$, with $\alpha(\psi_t)$ decreasing in distance from ψ_V . This formalizes: each virtuous act deepens virtue; each vicious act deepens vice; and early formation is cheapest.

- (iv) **Self-examination as Φ -moderator:** The daily self-examination protocol (Chapter 3) acts on the transition function by making $\Delta\psi$ conscious and directed, rather than allowing drift to accumulate unobserved.

17.3 The Value Function and the Priority of Early Formation

Let $V_t(\psi_t)$ denote the value function: the minimum expected discounted loss achievable from state (ψ_t, t) onwards:

$$V_t(\psi_t) = \min_{\delta_t} \mathbb{E} \left[L^P(\delta_{\psi_t}(X_t^{\text{eff}}), \theta_t) + \beta V_{t+1}(\Phi(\psi_t, \delta_{\psi_t}(X_t^{\text{eff}}), \theta_t)) \right]. \quad (17.1)$$

Proposition 17.1 Value Function Ordering and the Investment Horizon

The value function satisfies:

- (i) $V_t(\psi_V) \leq V_t(\psi)$ for all $\psi \in \Psi$ and all t : the virtuous character minimizes expected loss at every period.
- (ii) The gap $\Delta V_t \equiv V_t(\psi) - V_t(\psi_V)$ is strictly increasing in the remaining horizon $T - t$:

$$\frac{\partial \Delta V_t}{\partial (T - t)} > 0.$$

- (iii) Therefore the marginal value of character investment is maximized at $t = 1$ (the earliest period) and declines monotonically thereafter. This is the formal statement of Plutarch's claim in "On Education" that character formation is "of the first and middle and last importance": it is most valuable precisely because it operates

over the longest horizon.

17.4 Self-Examination as a Bayesian Filtering Problem

The agent's true character state ψ_t is unobservable; it must be inferred from the behavioral record $\mathcal{B}_t = \{a_1, \dots, a_t\}$ and external feedback $\{y_s\}_{s \leq t}$.

Definition 17.2 The Character Filtering Problem

The posterior character estimate is:

$$\hat{\psi}_t = \mathbb{E}[\psi_t \mid \mathcal{B}_t, \{y_s\}_{s \leq t}].$$

The self-examination protocol (Chapter 3) is the update procedure for $\hat{\psi}_t$ at end of each period, using the five diagnostic questions as the sufficient statistic for the filter.

Proposition 17.2 Filtering Value of Honest and Adversarial Feedback

Posterior variance of the character estimate satisfies:

$$\text{Var}(\psi_t \mid \mathcal{B}_t, \{y_s^T\}, \{y_s^E\}) \leq \text{Var}(\psi_t \mid \mathcal{B}_t, \{y_s^T\}) \leq \text{Var}(\psi_t \mid \mathcal{B}_t, \{y_s^F\}),$$

where y^T , y^E , y^F are feedback from true friends, enemies, and flatterers respectively. Honest counsel reduces posterior variance; adversarial feedback reduces it further by exposing blind spots. Flattery inflates posterior variance with systematic positive bias, causing the agent to overestimate $\hat{\psi}_t$ and therefore to operate with a suboptimal decision rule — a compounding error across all future periods.

Chapter 18

The Complete System and the Formal Definition of *phronesis*

“He to whom the deity has vouchsafed all three elements — nature, training, and practice — achieves perfect excellence.”

Plutarch, *On Education*

18.1 Assembly: The Integrated System

The Complete Waldian-Plutarchian Decision System

Primitive Elements:

$\Theta = \Theta_{\text{fortune}} \times \Theta_{\text{social}}$	adversarial parameter space
$\mathcal{A}(\psi) \subseteq \mathcal{A}_{\text{max}}$	character action space
$X_{\text{eff}} = X_{\text{true}} + \varepsilon(\psi, A_t, S_t)$	character-filtered observation
$L^P(a, \theta) = L_{\text{ext}}(a, \theta) + \lambda L_{\text{int}}(a, \psi), \lambda > 0$	Plutarchian loss
$\delta_\psi : X_{\text{eff}} \rightarrow \mathcal{A}(\psi)$	character as decision rule

Risk Decomposition:

$$R(\delta_\psi, \theta) = \underbrace{R_{\text{char}}(\psi, \theta)}_{\text{hexis bias}} + \underbrace{R_{\text{affect}}(\psi, \theta)}_{\text{anger, anxiety}} + \underbrace{R_{\text{social}}(\psi, \theta)}_{\text{flattery, isolation}} + \underbrace{R_{\text{fortune}}(\theta)}_{\text{irreducible}}$$

Three Optimality Results (all achieved simultaneously by δ_{ψ_V}):

Admissibility: δ_{ψ_V} dominates all non-virtuous rules (Prop. 16.1)

Minimax: $\delta_{\psi_V} = \arg \min_{\delta} \max_{\theta} R(\delta, \theta)$ (Prop. 16.2)

Bayes: $\delta_{\psi_V} = \arg \min_{\delta} r(\pi_{\psi_V}, \delta)$ (Prop. 16.3)

Sequential Value Function: $V_t(\psi_V) \leq V_t(\psi) \quad \forall \psi, t$

$$\Delta V_t = V_t(\psi) - V_t(\psi_V) \text{ increasing in } T - t$$

Character Dynamics: $\psi_{t+1} = \Phi(\psi_t, a_t, \theta_t)$

Attractor structure on $\mathcal{C}_V \cup \mathcal{C}_W$ with habituation deposit toward ψ_V per virtuous act

Character Filter:

$$\hat{\psi}_t = \mathbb{E}[\psi_t \mid \mathcal{B}_t, \{y_s\}] : \quad \text{Var}(\hat{\psi}_t) \downarrow \text{ with honest + adversarial counsel}$$

18.2 The Waldian Reading of Each Essay

Essay in <i>Moralia</i>	Waldian Component	Effect
On Education	$V_t(\psi_V) \ll V_t(\psi_W)$	Value function
Virtue May Be Taught	Φ is learnable	Character control
On Virtue and Vice	Attractor dynamics of Φ	Basin stability
Progress in Virtue	Filter $\hat{\psi}_t$	State estimation
On Contentedness	$\sigma_0^2 \rightarrow 0$ (affect noise)	$R_{\text{affect}} \downarrow$
On Restraining Anger	$\kappa^2 A_t^2 \rightarrow 0$	$R_{\text{affect}} \downarrow$
On Curiosity	Attention scope of X_{eff}	$R_{\text{char}} \downarrow$
On Shyness	Information set expansion	$ \mathcal{X} \uparrow$
On Talkativeness	Maturation time τ_m	Signal stability
Flatterer vs. Friend	$b^F > 0$ vs. $b^T \approx 0$	$R_{\text{social}} \downarrow$
Benefited by Enemies	$b^E < 0$ corrects $\bar{b}^F$	$R_{\text{social}} \downarrow$
Abundance of Friends	(n_T, n_E, n_F) portfolio	$R_{\text{social}} \downarrow$
On Fortune	Θ adversarial	Minimax justified
On Exile	$V(G_I, \theta) = v_I$ constant	R_{fortune} accepted

18.3 The Formal Definition of *phronesis*

We arrive at the culminating formal result: practical wisdom as a decision-theoretic object.

Formal Definition of Practical Wisdom (*phronesis*)

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in the Waldian-Plutarchian system is the character configuration $\psi_V \in \Psi$ solving the lifetime minimax sequential decision problem:

$$\psi_V = \arg \min_{\psi \in \Psi} \max_{\theta \in \Theta} \mathbb{E} \left[\sum_{t=1}^T \beta^{t-1} L^P(\delta_\psi(X_t^{\text{eff}}), \theta_t) \right],$$

subject to: character transition dynamics Φ , the social observation model X_{social} , the character-filtered observation $X_{\text{eff}} = X_{\text{true}} + \varepsilon(\psi, A_t, S_t)$, and the Plutarchian loss $L^P = L_{\text{ext}} + \lambda L_{\text{int}}$.

ψ_V is simultaneously:

- the admissible rule that no alternative dominates;
- the minimax-optimal policy under adversarial fortune;
- the Bayes-optimal policy under the well-calibrated prior;
- the value-function minimizer at every period and every horizon;
- the character that drives all three reducible risk components to zero, accepting R_{fortune} with equanimity.

The *Moralia* is Plutarch's extended practical treatise on how to find and maintain ψ_V under the conditions of ordinary human life.

Remark

The power of the Waldian-Plutarchian identification is that it resolves an ancient tension: whether virtue is *merely* intrinsically good or also instrumentally optimal. In the Waldian system, δ_{ψ_V} is simultaneously morally good ($L_{\text{int}} = 0$) and strategically optimal (admissible, minimax, Bayes-optimal, value-minimizing). The two evaluations converge. This is the formal meaning of *eudaimonia*: the state in which moral excellence and practical optimality are one and the same thing.

Synthesis: Ten Principles of Plutarchian Praxis

“What is the good of a house beautifully furnished if the man who lives in it is ugly in his soul?”

Plutarch, *On Education*

The foregoing analysis distills into ten principles that together constitute the **Plutarchian Praxis** for daily decision-making. These are not rules for particular occasions but standing orientations of character and attention — what Plutarch would call the *hexis* of the wise practitioner.

The Ten Principles of Plutarchian Praxis

- P1. Invest in formation before strategy.** The quality of your decisions is determined primarily by the quality of your character. No decision method compensates for a poorly formed decision-maker. Invest in education, in genuine reflection, and in the cultivation of virtue before seeking tactical advantages.
- P2. Treat habit as your decision infrastructure.** Your settled dispositions determine your effective choice set more than your de-

liberative episodes. Cultivate daily habits of attention, restraint, self-examination, and honest inquiry. These compound over time into a durable platform for good judgment.

P3. Maintain your affective baseline. The state of your inner life is a major determinant of decision quality. Chronic discontent, envy, and anxiety are not just unpleasant; they are cognitively disabling. Practice *euthymia*: the daily cultivation of contentedness through proper comparison, present attention, and gratitude for existing goods.

P4. Govern your passions — do not suppress them. Reason and passion are not enemies but partners. The goal is *metriopatheia*: the moderation of passion so that it serves rather than overrides deliberation. In anger especially, create temporal distance between arousal and response.

P5. Direct inquiry inward. Allocate your cognitive attention primarily to your own decisions, habits, and character rather than to the affairs of others. The most important object of your study is yourself, and the inquiry is never exhausted.

P6. Reserve speech for matured judgment. Deliberation requires interior space and time. Premature verbalization exposes immature judgment to social pressure and produces premature closure. Speak when judgment has ripened; listen until it has.

P7. Seek honest counsel and recognize its rarity. True friends who will speak the truth are among your most valuable decision assets. Invest in these friendships; protect them. Be deeply suspicious of counsel that is uniformly agreeable.

P8. Extract information from adversity. Your enemies, your critics, your setbacks, and your failures are information sources that your friends and your successes cannot provide. Receive adverse signals with equanimity and interrogate them for their truth-content before responding.

P9. Invest in interior goods for robustness. Across all the states that fortune may impose — poverty, exile, illness, disgrace — the goods of character and judgment survive intact. Build your decision platform on foundations that fortune cannot reach.

P10. Examine your life daily. The examined life is not a philosophical luxury but a practical necessity. Without systematic self-examination, the drift of habit goes unnoticed, flattery goes undetected, anger goes uncorrected, and progress remains unmeasured. Examine daily, honestly, and without self-indulgence.

These ten principles are neither a recipe nor an algorithm. They are a *praxis*: a way of inhabiting one's own life that develops, through sustained practice, into the settled character from which good decisions naturally emerge. Plutarch's genius is to see that the question of how to decide well is ultimately not a question about decision procedures but about the person who decides. Improve the person; improve the decisions.

There is no shortcut. There is no method that substitutes for the long work of formation. This is, in the end, the most demanding and the most hopeful message of the *Moralia*: that the improvement of our decisions is within our power, is never complete, and is always worth pursuing.

Bibliographic Note

Primary Source. This monograph draws throughout on the ethical essays of Plutarch's *Moralia*, in the English translation of Arthur Richard Shilleto, M.A. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1898), available in the public domain via Project Gutenberg (eBook #23639). The twenty-six ethical essays treated in this volume constitute what Shilleto considered "the cream of the *Moralia*": a series of treatises on what he called "the Ethics of the Hearth and Home."

The Greek Text. The authoritative modern editions of the *Moralia* are those of the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press), edited and translated by various scholars. The Greek text follows the *Bibliotheca Teubneriana* tradition, with Wytttenbach's edition remaining an important reference for the commentary tradition.

Historical Reception. For Plutarch's influence on Renaissance and early modern thought, the reader is directed to Montaigne's *Essays*, which quote the *Moralia* as frequently as the *Lives*; to Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living*; and to Emerson's essay on Plutarch in *Representative Men*. Archbishop Trench's *Plutarch: His Life, His Lives, and His Morals* (London: Macmillan, 1874) remains readable and useful.

Decision Theory. The decision-theoretic framework employed in this monograph draws on the Waldian tradition of statistical decision theory, as synthesized in Abraham Wald's *Statistical Decision Functions* (1950), and on the broader literature of behavioral decision theory including Kahneman and

Tversky's prospect theory. The CAIL framework within which this analysis operates is developed in the companion monographs that are available freely at the site of the laboratory <https://cail.ba.uoa.gr>.

Glossary of Greek Terms

apatheia

The Stoic ideal of passionlessness, which Plutarch critiques as neither achievable nor desirable.

aretē

Virtue; excellence of character. The central goal of Plutarch's ethical programme.

askesis

Practice; the disciplined exercise of capacities. One of the three elements of the Formative Triangle.

ataraxia

Tranquillity; the undisturbed state of the mind. Related to but distinct from *euthymia*.

dysoresia

False shame; bashfulness that prevents the asking of necessary questions or the speaking of necessary truths.

enkrateia

Self-control; mastery over one's appetites and impulses.

ethos

Character; habit. The root of the Greek word for ethics (*ethike*).

eudaimonia

Flourishing; the good life. The ultimate goal toward which Plutarch's praxis is directed.

euthymia

Contentedness; good cheer; the affective baseline of the well-ordered soul.

hexis

Settled disposition; the stable character configuration from which actions emerge.

kairos

The opportune moment; the right time for action.

kolakeia

Flattery; the practice of the flatterer (*kolax*) who provides biased, agreeable counsel.

logos

Reason; discourse; the rational faculty of the soul.

metriopatheia

The moderation of passion; the Plutarchian mean between *apatheia* and excessive emotionality.

paideia

Education; the comprehensive formation of character and intellect.

parrhesia

Frankness of speech; the courage to say what is true and necessary, especially in counsel.

pathos

Passion; the affective and motivational dimension of the soul.

philia

Friendship; the relationship of genuine mutual care and honest counsel.

phronesis

Practical wisdom; the capacity to perceive what a situation requires and to act accordingly.

polyphramosynē

Curiosity (pathological); the excessive, misdirected desire to know others' private affairs.

praxis

Action; practice; the behavioral expression of character.

sōphrosynē

Temperance; self-restraint; one of the four cardinal virtues.

tyche

Fortune; chance; the external state variable that the agent does not control.

List of Formal Elements

Axioms

- A1. Dispositional Priority Axiom (Chapter 1)
- A2. Teachability of Virtue (Chapter 2)
- A3. Attractor Axiom (Chapter 2)
- A4. Interiority Axiom (Chapter 3)
- A5. Present Sufficiency Axiom (Chapter 4)
- A6. Early Intervention Axiom (Chapter 5)
- A7. Scope Axiom of Inquiry (Chapter 6)
- A8. Attention Concentration Axiom (Chapter 7)
- A9. Friend as Signal Provider (Chapter 8)
- A10. Enemy as Character Stress-Test (Chapter 9)
- A11. Interior Invariance Axiom (Chapter 11)
- A12. Portability Axiom (Chapter 12)

Propositions

- P1. Compensatory Cultivation (Chapter 1)

- P2. Moderation Proposition (Chapter 2)
- P3. Friendship Scarcity Proposition (Chapter 10)
- P4. Adversarial Information Proposition (Chapter 9)
- P5. Consistency Test (Chapter 8)
- P6. Parrhesia Proposition (Chapter 6)
- P7. Relationship Depreciation Proposition (Chapter 5)
- P8. Pericles and Demosthenes as Models (Chapter 7)
- P9. Stoic Hedge (Chapter 4)
- P10. Kairos Proposition (Chapter 11)
- P11. Reframing Proposition (Chapter 12)

Definitions

- D1. Formative Triangle (Chapter 1)
- D2. Bipartite Decision Architecture (Chapter 2)
- D3. Virtuous Progress Indicators (Chapter 3)
- D4. Euthymia as Decision Baseline (Chapter 4)
- D5. Anger as Decision Noise (Chapter 5)
- D6. Curiosity as Attention Misallocation (Chapter 6)
- D7. Shyness as Information Avoidance (Chapter 6)
- D8. Deliberative Maturation Time (Chapter 7)
- D9. Signal-Extraction Problem of Counsel (Chapter 8)
- D10. Adversarial Signal Quality (Chapter 9)

D11. Fortune as External State Variable (Chapter 11)

Plutarchian Praxis: The Art of Daily Decision

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“What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.”
— Plutarch, *On Contentedness of Mind*