

Phillip Mitsis*

Plutarch and everyday aesthetics of living

Abstract

Contemporary aesthetics describes aesthetic experience in terms of attention, together with absorption, salience, and sustained engagement. Although illuminating cognitive and temporal structures, often implicitly assumed is that richer experience corresponds to heightened responsiveness. Yet, if intensification functions as a normative touchstone, aesthetics risks describing a few moments unusually well while misdescribing the aesthetic experience of most people for most of their lives. Similarly, capacities culturally associated with youth and its readiness for emotional escalation serve as the unspoken basis for the majority of accounts of aesthetic engagement. Ancient Greek and Roman writings, however, offer a different valuation based on the arc of lives. Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle each treat pleasurable experience as something distributed across a life, not as moments of episodic intensification, while Plutarch repeatedly evaluates responsiveness in terms of measure (μέτρον), steadiness (ῥαυχία), fittingness (πρέπον), and the right time (καιρός). Recovering Plutarch's aesthetics allows us to diagnose the tacit evaluative metrics of contemporary theories of aesthetics and to open up to philosophical scrutiny what it would mean for aesthetics to become explicitly sensitive to the arc of lives.

Keywords

Aesthetic experience, Aging, Plutarch

Received: 10/03/2026

Editing by: Silvia Pieroni

© 2026 The Author. Open Access published under the terms of the CC-BY-4.0.
pm4@nyu.edu (New York University)

* The Author of this article have been invited for his internationally relevant work on the topic of the issue.

To lead a life is to be always aware that the moving present
is embedded in an extended history, which helps determine
the significance of what one does or feels now.
(Thomas Nagel)

1. Introduction

Modern aesthetic theory has increasingly centered its analyses on attention, and thus on absorption, immersion, salience, affective intensity, and the temporal shaping of an aesthetic experience. Yet its emphasis on momentary engagement leaves relatively unexplored the broader question of how aesthetic responsiveness is calibrated across the arc of a life. Moreover, even where recent work departs from older “snapshot” models of detached contemplation, it often retains an implicit evaluative proxy according to which an aesthetic experience is better if it deepens engagement, amplifies salience, or sustains involvement at higher amplitudes. The point is not that contemporary aesthetics advocates crude maximalism *per se*, but that its normative vocabulary repeatedly gravitates toward episodic intensification, depth, richness, vividness, and sustained absorption in ways that quietly shape how aesthetic value is described and evaluated.

Once this tendency is brought into view, however, one of its consequences becomes difficult to overlook. The forms of responsiveness implicitly valorized in contemporary aesthetic theory closely resemble capacities culturally associated with youth and its rapid attentional uptake, tolerance for dense stimulation, openness to novelty, and readiness for emotional escalation. The process of growing older, in contrast, thus can appear as limitation and deflation. Slower responsiveness, diminished appetite for novelty, or reduced tolerance for sensory intensity are readily interpreted as losses relative to a youthful baseline of heightened engagement. Even discussions that approach the experience of aging with sympathy frequently treat later life as a problem to be managed or compensated for with guarded euphemism, rather than as a standpoint from which the overall governing metric of the aesthetic might itself be reconsidered. Seen from this perspective, the arc of lives does not simply add a distinct and novel topic into aesthetics, it exposes a structural question about the standards through which aesthetic experiences are evaluated. If aesthetic success is tacitly measured by a metric of intensity and heightened uptake, and changes in responsiveness across the arc of a life are

seen only as departures from a youthful norm, the field risks misdescribing the aesthetic lives of most people for most of their lives.

Ancient Greek and Roman writers suggest a different calibration of aesthetic value. Although increasing maturity may alter desire, affect, and perception, ancient authors do not consistently interpret these changes as aesthetic deprivation. Instead they often describe even senescence as involving a redistribution of salience in what presents itself as worth noticing, responding to, and taking pleasure in. What fades is not pleasure as such, but particular modes of intensification. In their place emerge perhaps quieter but more stable evaluative terms that shape the unfolding of everyday activity: proportion (μέτρον), fittingness (τὸ πρέπον), steadiness (ἡσυχία), and the right time (καιρός). These concepts do not deny vivid experience, but they situate it within a broader framework in which responsiveness remains proportionate across the span of life.

The present essay argues that a sustained ancient exposition of such a calibration can be found in Plutarch's *Moralia*. In treatises such as *On listening to lectures*, *On the control of anger*, *On tranquillity of mind*, and *Whether an old man should engage in public affairs*, he offers a phenomenology of trained receptivity in which attention appears as a form of care (ἐπιμέλεια), as the capacity to follow a λόγος through time (ἀκολουθεῖν, παρακολουθεῖν τῷ λόγῳ), and more generally as the disciplined management of salience within everyday practices. Read alongside Aristotle's life-course typologies in *Rhetoric* II.12-14, Plato's account of musical habituation and the education of pleasure, and Democritus's emphasis on psychophysical stability and measure, Plutarch reveals an alternative basis for aesthetic value grounded in the *kalon* (beauty/good) of experiences and in lives shaped by measure and proportion. To recover this orientation is not simply to excavate an ancient doctrine. Rather, it can illuminate the contingency of some of the most basic and largely unspoken evaluative assumptions of contemporary aesthetics while helping to recover an expanded evaluative vocabulary rooted in the moral and aesthetic structure of lives embedded in an extended history.

My argument unfolds in three steps. It begins by examining how contemporary aesthetics has come to treat intensification as an implicit proxy for aesthetic value. It then turns to Ancient Greco-Roman writings to recover an alternative vocabulary of measure, proportion, and temporal appropriateness. Finally, it shows how Plutarch's treatises render this alternative calibration visible within the aesthetic practices of everyday finite lives.

2. Modern aesthetic theory, attention, and youth-norm baseline

Large and influential strands of modern aesthetic theory have increasingly made attention central to their explanatory vocabulary. Across analytic and post-analytic traditions alike, aesthetic engagement is no longer described primarily in terms of detached contemplation, “snapshots” as it were, but as a temporally structured form of involvement articulated through such notions as absorption, immersion, salience, affective uptake, and perceptual organization. In the philosophy of the narrative arts and of music, temporality is treated as internal to appreciation in ways that can make “depth” look like “more” – more sustained, more integrated, more engrossing.

Noël Carroll’s seminal analyses of narrative, for example, show how artworks guide attention through sequences of questions, expectations, and emotional assessments that draw audiences into increasingly sustained cognitive and affective participation. His account does not equate aesthetic value with mere stimulation. On the contrary, engagement is treated as cognitively organized rather than sensational. Yet the evaluative vocabulary of grippingness, absorption, vividness, emotional uptake, and the like that accompanies such analyses tends to describe aesthetic success in terms of progressively stronger forms of attentional capture (Carroll 2001). Jerrold Levinson’s influential account of musical understanding had developed a closely related temporal perspective. The appreciation of music, on his view, unfolds within the act of listening itself “in the moment”, requiring the listener to inhabit the developing succession of sounds rather than apprehend musical form from a reflective distance (Levinson 1997). Bence Nanay’s further attempt to integrate aesthetics with the philosophy of perception assigns attention an equally central role. In his influential account of “aesthetic attention”, aesthetic experience depends upon the selective foregrounding and organization of perceptual content within individual experiences more generally (Nanay 2016).

Taken together, these approaches have greatly enriched the philosophical description of aesthetic engagement by emphasizing its temporal structure and its dependence upon the organization of attention. At the same time, they reveal a broader tendency within contemporary aesthetics to evaluate aesthetic success in terms of how powerfully attention is mobilized and sustained. By the same token, philosophical work on attention outside aesthetics, especially accounts that treat it as func-

tionally significant for agency, reinforces this orientation. Wayne Wu's influential account, for instance, characterizes attention as a mechanism of "selection for action", through which certain representations are prioritized for further processing and behavioral guidance (Wu 2014). In this framework, attention is not merely a passive condition of awareness but an active organizational capacity that directs cognition and agency. This makes it natural for aestheticians to treat "better" aesthetic experience as a more effectively organized and sustained deployment of attention. Yet it is precisely at this point that a subtle but consequential normative shift can occur. When aesthetic value is described in terms of depth of engagement, richness of uptake, or sustained absorption, intensification quietly begins to function as an evaluative proxy.

The implications of this alignment become clearer when it is considered against the backdrop of broader cultural narratives. Margaret Gullette has argued that modern Western societies often frame aging through what she calls a "decline narrative", a pervasive script in which later life is understood primarily in terms of slowly diminishing capacity and narrowing experience (Gullette 2004). Kathleen Woodward likewise emphasizes that age is culturally performed against implicit norms of productivity, visibility, and energetic presence (Woodward 1999). If aesthetic responsiveness is implicitly measured by speed and openness to stimulation, and youth functions as the standard of vitality, then growing older will appear as deviation from that norm in ways that seem natural and unmarked. A slower tempo of response or diminished appetite for novelty can then appear as flattening or loss. Thus, even sympathetic discussions of the nature of aging often proceed within this horizon with conceptions of biological fate that seek euphemistic "compensations" rather than recalibrations. As a result, the attention of the elderly is solicitously redirected toward alternative pleasures, new forms of stimulation or substitute activities that can take the place of "normal" ones no longer accessible. The underlying metric of aesthetic vitality, however, remains largely unexamined.

The flourishing literature on everyday aesthetics might seem to provide a natural corrective to this orientation. By expanding the scope of aesthetic inquiry beyond canonical artworks to include domestic environments, maintenance practices, and the textures of ordinary experience, this literature challenges the traditional association between aesthetic value and distinctive experiences of "spectacle". Yuriko Saito's *Everyday aesthetics*, for example, demonstrates how aesthetic judgment permeates routine activities such as cleaning, cooking, and caring for shared spaces

(Saito 2007). Sherri Irvin likewise argues that everyday experience is “replete with aesthetic character”, even when such experiences are simple or fragmented and lack the unity or closure traditionally associated with artworks (Irvin 2008). Thomas Leddy similarly explores how ordinary language and common experience register aesthetic qualities long before they are articulated within theoretical discourse (Leddy 2012). To be sure, scholars of everyday aesthetics have themselves sometimes framed the field through a contrast between two orientations, one that emphasizes the refinement of attention and the cultivation of perceptual sensitivity, and another that turns toward the aesthetic significance of ordinary practices whose value does not depend upon heightened experience. This internal debate has been important in broadening the scope of aesthetic inquiry. Yet even when the emphasis falls on ordinary practices rather than heightened perception, the criteria by which aesthetic success is assessed often remain tied to some form of attentional enrichment or experiential refinement. Disagreements have been more about the domain of the aesthetic as opposed to the metric by which aesthetic success is assessed.

As a result, what remains generally underexplored in recent aesthetics is the possibility that aesthetic value might depend less on the amplification of experience than on the proportion through which responsiveness remains calibrated across the course of life. It is precisely this alternative orientation that the ancient materials examined here illuminate.

3. Measure and the arc of a life

Recovering antiquity in contemporary aesthetics need not mean simply ferreting out earlier versions of contemporary debates. We can also recover different ways of measuring aesthetic success and value. Greek and Roman writers often approach aesthetic questions from a standpoint in which the chief dangers are not insufficient vividness or a failure to be gripping, but the threat of volatility, disproportion, and fragmentation. By the same token, attention is not treated primarily as a resource to be intensified but as a variety of responsiveness that must remain proportionate to circumstances and to the life within which it unfolds. Rather than treating attention as a general cognitive resource whose value lies primarily in its intensification, they tend to embed modalities of responsive-

ness within a broader temporal framework. What counts as vivid, compelling, or worthy of response cannot be evaluated neutrally or independently of the stage of life in which it is encountered. This difference in orientation does not arise from a single doctrine or school, but across authors with very different metaphysical, epistemological, and psychological commitments one encounters a recurring suspicion of escalation as the primary measure of value. Instead, terms such as measure (μέτρον), fittingness (τὸ πρέπον), steadiness (ῥησυχία) and the right time (καιρός) serve to organize reflection on experience and character. The good life is not conceived as a sequence of intensifications but as a form of equilibrium in which responses remain proportionate to circumstances over time.

To see this, it might be useful to begin with Democritus, if only because of the unrelenting dominance of Plato and Aristotle in discussions of Greek aesthetics, and also because his materialism and skepticism serve as a counterpoint to the Platonic and Aristotelian frameworks so readily associated with Greek thought. The surviving fragments of Democritus (c. 460 BCE) are hardly even a mere shadow of what was reportedly a striking and powerful body of work, but what little remains exhibits a strongly anti-intensification sensibility. Though often remembered only as an atomist, Democritus's ethics remained influential throughout antiquity. His ethical vocabulary centers not on pleasure as acute experience but on εὐθυμία – a term variously mistranslated as cheerfulness, calmness, or serenity. It is a compound of εὐ and θυμῇ which denotes a well-conditioned state of the θυμός, where θυμός in the fifth century refers not merely to emotion but to spiritedness, affective orientation, and motivational disposition. In our most extensive surviving fragment reported by John Stobaeus (B 191), the term is paired with εὐσταθής ("well-established"), indicating that εὐθυμία names an affective register of structural steadiness or "good-spiritness" rather than a purely episodic emotional state of "cheerfulness":

For human beings, good-spiritedness (εὐθυμία) comes about in measure of enjoyment (μετριότητι τέρψιος) and in proportion of life (βίου συμμετρίῃ). Things that fall short or exceed tend to shift and to produce large motions in the soul. Souls set in motion across great intervals are neither well-established (εὐσταθέες) nor good-spirited (εὐθυμοί).

Other fragments reinforce the point. The person who pursues wealth or novelty without limit is said to suffer restlessness and the absence of ἀταραξία (being without disturbance), and the one who measures his desires against

his capacities remains steady. The ideal is not climactic fulfillment but durable livability. Pleasure becomes condition rather than a telic peak and is valued accordingly.

Recent scholarship has underscored this anti-teleological dimension of early Greek thought. James I. Porter (2016) has argued that much archaic and early classical reflection resists the narrative of life as progressive culmination to an end. Rather than imagining fulfillment as the end-point toward which life must ascend, these traditions emphasize tone, texture, and proportion across time. A life succeeds not by reaching a maximal end state but by maintaining continuing coherence. Under such a framework, intensification is suspect and escalation threatens balance. Democritus gives expression to an ethical sensibility in which pleasure is stabilized rather than amplified. It is not rejected, but it is treated as something that must be distributed across the span of life in measure rather than pursued in isolated surges. The seeds of later recalibrational aesthetics are thus already present in his fragments since value resides in measured continuity and psychophysical proportionality.

Though Plato never mentions Democritus and reportedly wanted all of his works burned (D.L 9.40), in a deep sense he reflects Democritus's anti-escalation strand within a civic and pedagogical framework. His critique of poetry in the *Republic* is often read as hostility toward aesthetic pleasure. Yet, as Jessica Moss (2009; 2012) has shown in her careful studies of imitation and pleasure, Plato's concern is not that pleasure organizes attention and engages emotion *per se*, but that it has the ability to train the soul improperly. In *Republic* X, the mimetic poet appeals to the non-rational part of the soul, encouraging disproportionate affective responses to appearances. The danger is not that poetry itself is intense, but that it can habituate the soul to respond intensely in the wrong way and to crave repeated episodes of the wrong kinds of pleasurable experiences. Pleasure, left ungoverned, is able to magnify experiences beyond appropriate measure in ways that are harmful both to individuals and, as a consequence, to the city at large.

The *Laws* makes the life-course dimension explicit. Pleasure is not left to fluctuate with appetite or age, but musical education is designed to shape citizens from youth onward. Rhythm and repetition cultivate stable affective patterns and as Nickolas Pappas has emphasized in his work on Platonic aesthetics (2008; 2012), the aim is not the suppression of pleasure but its integration into civic order. Citizens must learn to take pleasure in what is orderly and fitting (πρέπον), not merely in what is striking or novel. The pedagogical program of the *Laws* presupposes that pleasure is educable

and can be aligned with measure (μέτρον) and proportion (συμμετρία). It must be habituated across generations as well so that citizens do not mistake escalation for value. Here again, the concern is not intensity as such, but misaligned intensity. The problem is disproportionate salience, the training of attention toward the wrong objects, or toward them at the wrong amplitude. Pleasure reorganizes the field of what matters and Plato thus embeds pleasure within a life-course and civic arc. It is shaped from youth onward and its amplitude must be regulated so that it supports rather than destabilizes order. The baseline is not maximal stimulation but fitting responsiveness to the right kind of aesthetic and ethical objects.

Aristotle's treatment of age in *Rhetoric* II.12-14 provides one of the most explicit ancient acknowledgments that responsiveness varies across the course of a life. His account is ostensibly descriptive and rhetorical. The orator must understand the dispositions (ῥῆθη) of audiences at different stages of life. In II.12, youth is characterized by heat (θερμότης), rapidity (ταχύτης), hopefulness (ἐλπίς), and magnification. The young are inclined toward μεγαλοπρεπές (magnificence) and they overestimate possibilities, respond quickly, and are drawn toward the future. Their pleasures are vivid and forward-looking, and they are easily seized by what appears great. In II.13, old age is described in cooler terms: ψυχρότης, βραδύτης, caution, suspicion. The old are more likely to recall past disappointments than to anticipate future triumphs. They hesitate where the young rush in, and their responses are tempered, their hopes restrained.

The tone of Aristotle's description has often been read as dismissive, yet the crucial philosophical point lies not in his normative preferences, but in the recognition that salience is dependent on life's stages. What grips the young does not grip the old in the same way. Amplitude changes. Aristotle's ideal lies in the mean – the prime (ἀκμή) between excess and deficiency, but the typology itself reveals something deeper, the field of what appears urgent, vivid, or compelling is reorganized over time. The young experience magnification; conversely, the old experience compression. The tempo of response shifts and Aristotle does not ask whether the compressed amplitude of old age might support alternative forms of value. His framework remains oriented toward persuasion and civic effectiveness of adults in their prime. Yet the groundwork is laid in the sense that the variability of salience across the life-course is acknowledged as structural.

Taken together, these strands of Democritean measure, Platonic habituation, and Aristotelian typology converge on a shared insight. Experi-

ence is not a neutral quantity to be intensified at will. It is shaped by character, distributed across time, and variable across stages of life. None of these authors equates value with escalation and they all are concerned, rather, with proportion. What remains largely undeveloped, despite their recognition that responsiveness changes as one follows out the arc of life, is the phenomenology of how such change might constitute a distinct mode of aesthetic life. For this we must turn to Plutarch.

Plutarch's treatises reflect the anti-escalation strand from Democritus, the pedagogical sensitivity of Plato, and the life-course typology from Aristotle, but he relocates these insights from theory into the texture of everyday practice. He shows what measured and proportionate experiences look like in listening, in conversation, in anger, and in civic presence. Contemporary intensification vocabularies sometimes masquerade as temporally neutral, as if any moment could in principle be maximized. But actual lives have changing deliberative landscapes, time-horizons, and pacing needs so that a single metric of peak absorption is normatively mis-specified. Plutarch's ancient calibration reminds us that measure, proportion, *kairos* and non-temporally neutral notions have long structured reflections on the course of life.

4. *Plutarch and the everyday*

Whereas Aristotle describes generational dispositions, Plato designs the education of pleasure from above, and Democritus approaches the question psychophysically from below, Plutarch returns to the small, repeatable acts through which attention is exercised: listening to a lecture, sharing a meal, restraining irritation, deciding whether to speak, deciding whether to enter or withdraw from civic affairs¹. Within these modest practices the

¹ Plutarch does not employ a single technical term corresponding to the modern notion of "attention." Instead, his ethical writings articulate attentive uptake through a structured family of terms that bind care, practice, directedness, temporal following, and normatively governed receptivity. Central to this field is ἐπιμέλεια / ἐπιμελεῖσθαι, which frames listening and perceptual uptake as matters of responsibility rather than capacity: one must "take care" in receiving λόγος, just as one takes care of bodies, offices, or moral conduct. Closely linked is μελέτη, whose semantic range bridges care and exercise, allowing attentiveness to be understood as something cultivated through repeated practice rather than as a naturally given disposition. What modern language glosses as "attention" is typically expressed through the directive idiom προσέχειν (τὸν νοῦν), which grammatically presents attentiveness as an activity of directing and holding the

redistribution of experiences and their corresponding pleasures across the course of a life becomes visible.

Plutarch is writing outside the systematizing ambitions of philosophical theory. The *Moralia* is a collection of treatises and dialogues addressed to friends, students, and civic interlocutors, often occasioned by particular circumstances of conversation or dispute. What unites these writings is therefore not doctrinal architecture but a persistent attention to the texture of lived practices. Plutarch does not define the aesthetic in abstract

mind toward an object rather than as a reified faculty. This directive model is complemented by verbs of temporal tracking – especially ἀκολουθεῖν / ἔπεσθαι (τῷ λόγῳ) – which conceptualize listening as following a discourse through time, preserving continuity rather than seizing isolated salient moments. Receptivity itself is articulated through δέχεσθαι / ἐνδέχεσθαι (τὸν λόγον), verbs of admitting and receiving that encode selectivity and normativity: λόγος may be taken in soberly or badly, attentively or carelessly. Around this core cluster gather further terms that sharpen particular aspects of the same structure. These include sobriety language (νήφω, νήπις) marking resistance to affective saturation; stabilization metaphors describing the end-state of training as grounded rather than reactive; and regimen vocabulary (ἔθος, ἐθίζειν, ἄσκησις) emphasizing formation across time.

Equally important is the vocabulary of proportion and timing, through which Plutarch's practical ethics acquires its distinctly aesthetic inflection. Terms such as μέτρον and μετρίως define the appropriate scale of response; συμμετρία names the fitting relation among elements within an activity or disposition; and καιρός marks the opportune moment at which speech, action, or restraint becomes appropriate. Together these concepts frame responsiveness not as maximal intensity but as well-timed and proportionate adjustment. The aesthetic vocabulary of proportion thus permeates Plutarch's moral reflections: success depends less on how strongly one reacts than on whether responses arrive in measure, in proportion, and at the right time. The social and intergenerational staging of attentiveness is captured through evaluative terms governing visibility and decorum – πρέπον (what is fitting or appropriate to a situation), αἰδώς / αἰσχύνη (a sense of shame or reverential restraint before others), τιμή / ἀτιμία (*honor and dishonor*), ψόγος / ὀνειδος (blame and reproach), and ἡσυχία / θόρυβος (quiet composure versus disruptive noise). These terms do not merely classify moral states, they regulate the perceptual field of shared life and who may properly appear, speak, or withdraw; at what tempo speech and action may unfold; and with what claim to recognition or regard. In this way the vocabulary of decorum functions simultaneously as ethical guidance and as an aesthetic grammar governing the visibility, rhythm, and fittingness of conduct within a community. Modalities are not treated as interchangeable. Auditory uptake (ἀκούειν, ἀκροᾶσθαι) supplies the primary temporal model for attentiveness in the treatises on listening and poetry, while broader perceptual language (αἰσθῆσις, αἰσθάνεσθαι) frames the redistribution of salience in discussions of tranquillity and anger. The present essay foregrounds only a small core of these terms in the main text, drawing selectively on the wider lexical field where it is philologically present in the passages under discussion.

terms, he shows how experience acquires tone through the way it is inhabited. He attends to posture, tempo, the way irritation narrows the field of vision, and the way convivial speech must modulate itself so as not to become oppressive. Again and again, his concern is with how life proceeds when it is properly paced.

In this respect Plutarch's sensibility resonates with Stanley Cavell's (1979) insistence that philosophy must return to the ordinary. For Cavell, (1990) the ordinary is not the residue left after theory has completed its work but the place where responsiveness becomes visible. What matters is not simply what we know but whether we acknowledge what stands before us, whether we register claims and grant uptake to what our habits encourage us to overlook. Read in this light, Plutarch's treatises appear less as antiquarian moralism than as inquiries into the conditions under which everyday life becomes intelligible and inhabitable.

What, then, is meant here by calling these practices "aesthetic"? Not, at least in the first instance, an orientation toward artworks as distinct objects of appreciation. The claim is rather that Plutarch evaluates forms of living by criteria of shape, proportion, rhythm, tonal fit, timing, and perceptual rightness. Listening well, mastering anger, achieving tranquillity, and adjusting the tempo of civic action are not merely morally approved outcomes. They are modes of comportment whose success depends upon how attention, affect, speech, and action are composed in time. In this broader sense familiar from work in everyday aesthetics and from existential reflections on the form of a life, the aesthetic names the felt fittingness or distortion of an activity as it unfolds. What matters is whether responses are scattered or gathered, abrupt or measured, shrill or attuned, disproportionate or composed. Plutarch's moral therapy is therefore not opposed to the aesthetic dimension of life but articulated through it. His therapeutic concern is inseparable from judgments about form.

This orientation becomes especially clear in Plutarch's treatment of pleasure. Pleasure, for him, is not an isolated sensation but a disposition that attaches to activities when they are engaged in well. It accompanies listening when one listens properly; it attends conversation when one speaks and yields with tact; it accompanies food and drink when they are taken with measure; it adheres to public life when one intervenes neither too quickly nor too slowly. These are not merely ethical achievements but aesthetic ones in a thick sense. They concern the rhythm, proportion, and felt rightness of lived experience.

Seen from this perspective, the life-course dimension that earlier Greek authors approached through typology or legislation becomes visible in Plutarch as a matter of lived adjustment. Certain pleasures dependent upon novelty, rapid stimulation, and sharp oscillations of hope and disappointment may lose their force. Yet the diminution of intensity does not exhaust the field of value. What often becomes more available are pleasures grounded in steadiness, familiarity, proportion (*μέτρον*), and the absence of disturbance.

Among the practices that Plutarch analyzes, listening occupies a privileged place, for it reveals most clearly how responsiveness must be governed if discourse and the forms of life that sustain it are to unfold across time without distortion.

4.1. Listening, measure, and the formation of a temporal self

Περὶ τοῦ ἀκούειν

Plutarch's reflections on listening provide one of the clearest points at which his recalibration of aesthetic responsiveness becomes visible. The treatise *On listening (to lectures)*, appears at first to belong squarely within the pedagogical tradition of Greek moral instruction. Addressed to a young man newly entering the intellectual world, it offers advice about how philosophical discourse ought to be received. Yet the treatise turns out to contain something more ambitious. It is an account of listening as a disciplined form of responsiveness in which the quality of attention itself becomes a matter of ethical and aesthetic judgment. From the outset Plutarch frames listening as an activity requiring formation rather than passive exposure. The young listener, he observes, often imagines that learning consists simply in hearing many speeches. Yet the use of λόγος demands something more demanding than this. "In matters of discourse, one must first learn to receive well before speaking forth, just as conception and the holding of what is fertile precede birth" (ἐν δὲ τῇ τοῦ λόγου χρειᾷ τὸ δέξασθαι καλῶς τοῦ προέσθαι πρότερόν ἐστιν, ὥσπερ τοῦ τεκεῖν τὸ συλλαβεῖν καὶ κατασχεῖν τι τῶν γονίμων, 42C-D). Listening therefore cannot be understood as passive receptivity. It is a preparatory discipline through which the mind learns to hold what is heard long enough for judgment to take shape. Plutarch reinforces the point through a vivid image. "Just as vessels tilt and adjust themselves toward what is poured into

them, so that the process becomes a true filling rather than a mere spilling, so listeners must offer themselves to the speaker and attune their hearing through attentive focus" (Τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἀγγεῖα πρὸς τὴν ὑποδοχὴν τῶν ἐγγεομένων ἐπικλίνουσι καὶ συνεπιστρέφουσιν, ἵν' ἐγγυσις ἀληθῶς, μὴ ἔκχυσις γένηται, αὐτοὺς δὲ τῷ λέγοντι παρέχειν καὶ συναρμόττειν τῇ προσοχῇ τὴν ἀκρόασιν, 42D).

The metaphor is instructive. The problem is not the scarcity of discourse but the posture of the hearer. A mind that remains inattentive allows λόγος to spill away without effect, while one that inclines itself toward what is said receives it as nourishment. The treatise repeatedly emphasizes that such listening requires a discipline of silence. "Everywhere silence is a safe adornment for the young," Plutarch remarks, "but especially when they are listening to another" (πανταχοῦ μὲν οὖν τῷ νέῳ κόσμος ἀσφαλὴς ἐστὶν ἡ σιωπή, μάλιστα δ' ὅταν ἀκούων ἐτέρου..., 43D). The inexperienced hearer, by contrast, interrupts too quickly, contradicting before the speaker has finished or reacting to isolated remarks without waiting to see how the argument unfolds. Such behavior disrupts the temporal structure of discourse itself. The proper listener allows the λόγος to complete its movement, even leaving a short interval after the speaker has finished lest something further be added or clarified (43E-F).

The discipline of listening therefore depends upon a capacity to resist disturbance. Plutarch repeatedly warns against the kinds of agitation that prevent attention from remaining proportionate to what is said. Envy, ambition, and competitive display can all distort the hearing of discourse. The envious hearer, he explains, becomes preoccupied not with the argument but with the reactions of the audience and the comparison between his own abilities and those of the speaker (44E-45B). The result is a fragmented attention in which the mind oscillates between resentment and self-display rather than attending to what is actually being said. Plutarch's diagnosis of such disturbance reveals the deeper structure of the treatise. Listening is not merely a cognitive activity; it is a calibration of the soul. Disturbance arises when the hearer allows his responses to exceed their proper scale. A well-ordered listener, by contrast, maintains proportion between the discourse and his own reactions. This is why Plutarch repeatedly contrasts the school (σχολή) with the theater (θέατρον) or concert hall (ῶδεῖον). The listener must remember, he says, that he has come "not to a theater or odeon but to a school and place of instruction" (οὐκ εἰς θέατρον οὐδ' ῶδεῖον ἀλλ' εἰς σχολὴν καὶ διδασκαλεῖον, 50C-D). To treat philosophical speech as a spectacle to be admired is therefore to misunderstand its purpose entirely.

The difference between these two modes of listening becomes especially vivid in Plutarch's reflections on applause. At times, he remarks, the noise within lecture halls becomes so excessive that those outside cannot tell whether a philosopher is speaking or a dancer performing (53E-F). Such scenes represent the collapse of philosophical listening into theatrical excitement. What is celebrated is no longer the content of the discourse but the stimulation produced by performance.

Against this model Plutarch proposes a different conception of intellectual pleasure. The hearer should evaluate the value of a discourse not by its rhetorical brilliance but by the transformation it produces within the soul. After leaving a lecture, he suggests, one ought to ask whether some disturbing passion has been softened, whether one's confidence has become steadier, or whether enthusiasm for virtue has grown stronger (52B-C). Just as one inspects one's appearance after leaving the barber, so one should examine the condition of one's soul after hearing a discourse.

The most famous image of the treatise appears near its conclusion. The mind, Plutarch writes, "is not a vessel that requires to be filled, but rather a kind of combustible material that needs only a spark – something that kindles in it a capacity for discovery and an aspiration toward truth" (Οὐ γὰρ ὡς ἀγγεῖον ὁ νοῦς ἀποπληρώσεως ἀλλ' ὑπεκκαύματος μόνον ὥσπερ ὕλη δεῖται, ὁρμὴν ἐμποιοῦντος εὐρετικὴν καὶ ὄρεξιν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν, 47F). A listener who merely warms himself by another's intellectual brilliance resembles someone who sits beside another person's fire enjoying the heat rather than lighting a fire of his own. Genuine listening must ignite thought rather than substitute for it.

The treatise contains an additional remark that is especially revealing for the present argument. Plutarch observes: "For in every work the beautiful comes about when many things, as it were like numbers, arrive at a single *kairos* through some symmetry (proportion) and harmony" (ὡς ἐν ἔργῳ γε παντὶ τὸ μὲν καλὸν ἐκ πολλῶν οἷον ἀριθμῶν εἰς ἓνα καιρὸν ἡκόντων ὑπὸ συμμετρίας τινὸς καὶ ἀρμονίας ἐπιτελεῖται, 52D-E), whereas ugliness can arise from a single gesture introduced at the wrong time. He immediately applies this principle to the comportment of listeners. Wandering eyes, whispering, inappropriate laughter, or restless movements can destroy the harmony of the setting even if everything else proceeds correctly. Listening, in other words, possesses an aesthetic form. Seen in this light, Plutarch's reflections on listening amount to more than pedagogical advice. They describe a discipline through which attention must accompany the unfolding of λόγος across time. The excellence of

the listener does not consist in heightened stimulation but in proportionate responsiveness. The one who interrupts prematurely, applauds excessively, or reacts competitively disrupts the temporal configuration of discourse, while the one who maintains composure allows the structure of the argument to emerge.

Once this metric is in view, the life-course implications of Plutarch's analysis begin to appear. The treatise is addressed to the young precisely because youth is inclined toward magnification and impatience. Yet the virtues he praises of silence, steadiness, and proportionate reception are cultivated through experience. The listener whose responses have cooled somewhat may find it easier to accompany discourse without being carried away by it. Listening therefore becomes a paradigm for aesthetic life more generally. The value of experience lies not in the intensification of perception at every moment but in the proportion through which attention accompanies what unfolds before it. The recalibration that Plutarch proposes does not diminish responsiveness. It restores its measure.

4.2. Anger, timing, and the discipline of the soul

Περὶ ἀοργησίας

If the treatise on listening shows how the soul must learn to accompany λόγος with steadiness rather than passivity, Plutarch's treatise *On anger* examines the moment in which that steadiness most visibly collapses. Anger, for Plutarch, is not merely a moral fault, it is a disturbance in the soul's temporal order. It disrupts the rhythm through which judgment and action remain proportionate to one another. Whereas listening demands a measured responsiveness that followed λόγος through time, anger compresses that interval and replaces reflection with immediacy. The soul ceases to accompany events and instead reacts to them with explosive haste.

Plutarch's analysis begins from a simple but penetrating observation about the phenomenology of anger. The angry person is not merely excited; he is deaf. As Fundanus, the treatise's speaker explains, οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀκούει τῶν ἐκτὸς ἢ ψυχὴ διὰ τὸν θόρυβον "the soul does not hear what comes from outside because of the noise within" (454A). The point is not rhetorical. Anger fills the interior field of attention with agitation and thereby blocks the reception of λόγος. Advice, correction, or persuasion cannot

enter because the soul has become acoustically saturated by its own disturbance. In this sense anger is not simply an excess of emotion but a failure of attentional economy. The very capacity that listening cultivated, the ability to receive λόγος without distortion, has been overwhelmed by internal noise. For this reason Plutarch insists that the remedies for anger must be prepared before the crisis arises. One must gather arguments in advance, storing them within the soul so that they are available at the moment of disturbance: “τὰ πρὸς τὸν θυμὸν βοηθήματα πόρρωθεν λαμβάνοντας ἐκ φιλοσοφίας κατακομίζειν εἰς τὴν ψυχὴν” (the aids against anger (*thumos*) must be brought from afar from philosophy and stored within the soul, 453F). The metaphor is military rather than medical. Anger resembles a sudden assault, and the soul must be provisioned in advance if it is to withstand the attack. Once the disturbance has taken hold, external admonition arrives too late. The only effective resistance is the presence of an internalized reasoning already habituated to intervene. Yet Plutarch does not present the solution as repression. His insistence on preparing “aids against anger” in advance and cultivating delay is a way of reshaping what enters the deliberative landscape and when; it is temporal agency, not mere repression. The aim is not emotional extinction but the restoration of proportion. Anger becomes destructive not because it exists but because it outruns judgment. What must therefore be recovered is the interval within which evaluation can occur. The decisive discipline is delay. Fundanus repeatedly emphasizes that punishment and correction must never be administered in the immediate surge of anger. Instead one should listen, wait, and allow the disturbance to settle before acting. Only then can the response be properly calibrated. Plutarch describes the correct standard with a sequence of adverbs that express both ethical and aesthetic measure: “τὸ διδάσκειν εὐκαίρως τοῦτο ποιεῖν καὶ μετρίως καὶ ὠφελίμως καὶ πρεπόντως” (seasonably, moderately, usefully, and fittingly, 459D). Each term contributes to a single idea. Action must occur in the right temporal relation to the situation. Punishment delivered too quickly is as defective as punishment never delivered at all. The virtue lies in the ability to identify the appropriate moment (*kairos*) at which response becomes both effective and proportionate.

In this respect anger resembles a fire whose danger depends on the materials it is allowed to consume. Plutarch compares the early stages of anger to a small flame fed by trivial stimuli – jest, irritation, minor insult. If these beginnings are left unattended, the disturbance grows rapidly and takes hold of the whole soul. But if the flame is deprived of fuel at the outset, it extinguishes itself. Silence, delay, or simple inattention often suffice

to dissolve the disturbance before it reaches full intensity. The discipline required here is not heroic but attentional, one must refuse to amplify the initial provocation.

Plutarch illustrates the point through examples of self-command drawn from political and philosophical life. Socrates, sensing irritation rising within himself, would deliberately soften his voice and expression, adjusting posture and tone until the internal agitation subsided. By moving the body and speech toward calmness he reversed the emotional trajectory that anger had begun to impose (455a). What matters is not the suppression of emotion but the reorientation of the soul's movement before it gathers irreversible momentum.

The opposite condition appears when anger is allowed to govern action. Plutarch describes the spectacle with a mixture of psychological acuity and moral satire. The angry person shouts, threatens, and lashes out indiscriminately at friends, family members, servants, even inanimate objects. Kings strike the sea, warriors smash their instruments, tyrants rage against mountains. Such gestures appear powerful but in fact betray weakness. They reveal a soul unable to sustain proportion, reacting to trivial stimuli with exaggerated force. Anger therefore produces a paradoxical combination of terror and absurdity: it is at once frightening and ridiculous.

This double character explains why Plutarch treats anger as the most publicly degrading of the passions. Other vices may remain concealed; anger displays itself immediately in voice, posture, and expression. The face becomes distorted, speech grows harsh, and the body loses its composure. In observing these transformations Plutarch emphasizes the aesthetic dimension of the passion. Anger disfigures the visible form of the person who experiences it. It replaces harmony with agitation and rhythm with convulsion. The corrective discipline, by contrast, restores composure through moderation and delay. One must learn to hear explanations before punishing, to distinguish between intentional injury and simple mistake, and to interpret offenses within the broader context of circumstance and character. By introducing reflection into the moment of reaction, the soul re-establishes its capacity for proportionate response.

What emerges from this analysis is a conception of virtue that depends not on emotional intensity but on temporal calibration. The excellence Plutarch praises lies in the ability to interrupt escalation, to create space for judgment, and to act only when the moment is appropriate. Anger therefore becomes a test case for the broader discipline of atten-

tion developed in the previous treatise. Just as the listener must accompany λόγος without surrendering to spectacle, the agent must respond to provocation without being seized by it. The control of anger thus reveals the deeper principle governing Plutarch's moral psychology. What must be preserved is not simply rational dominance over passion but the proper pacing of the soul's responses. Action that occurs too quickly loses proportion; action that occurs too late loses effectiveness. Virtue resides in the interval between these extremes.

From this perspective the treatise on anger prepares the way for a more comprehensive account of composure. If anger shows how the soul becomes distorted in the moment of acute escalation, the companion treatise *On tranquillity of mind* asks a broader question. What habits of judgment and comparison allow an entire life to remain proportionate rather than perpetually unsettled?

4.3. *Tranquillity and the economy of attention*

Περὶ εὐθυμίας

If the treatise on anger examines the moment at which the soul's responsiveness loses proportion, the treatise *On tranquillity of mind* (Περὶ εὐθυμίας) turns to the larger question of how such proportion may be stabilized across an entire life. Anger revealed the violence with which disturbance can seize the soul. Tranquillity concerns the more difficult task of maintaining a steady orientation toward the changing conditions of human experience. What Plutarch calls εὐθυμία is therefore not a temporary mood but a structural disposition of the soul. It names a condition in which judgment, expectation, and perception remain harmonized with the realities of human life.

Plutarch begins by locating the source of tranquillity not in external circumstances but in the soul's internal discipline. Writing to Paccius, he insists that neither wealth, reputation, nor political influence can secure a calm life unless the mind has learned how to use what it possesses:

For from where could wealth, reputation, or influence at court derive any benefit for freedom from distress of soul and a life free from turbulence (literally without waves), unless the disposition that uses them is pleasant to those who possess them and does not continually chase after what is absent? (Πόθεν γε δὴ πρὸς ἀλυπίαν ψυχῆς καὶ βίον ἀκύμονα χρημάτων ὄφελος ἢ δόξης ἢ δυνάμεως ἐν

αύλαϊς, ἂν μὴ τὸ χρώμενον [465b] εὐχάριστον ἦ τοῖς ἔχουσι καὶ τὸ τῶν ἀπόντων μὴ δεόμενον αἰεὶ παρακολουθῇ).

The metaphor is maritime. Life becomes turbulent not because circumstances change but because the soul fails to steer properly among them. External conditions provide the waves and winds of experience; tranquillity depends on the pilot who interprets and distributes their force. This emphasis leads Plutarch to reject a common philosophical simplification. Some writers had claimed that tranquillity requires withdrawal from action altogether. Plutarch criticizes this view explicitly. One well-known maxim had advised: “Anyone who intends to be tranquil must not undertake many activities, neither in private life nor in public affairs” (Δεῖ τὸν εὐθυμεῖσθαι μέλλοντα μὴ πολλὰ πρήσσειν μήτε ἰδίῃ μήτε ξυνῇ, 465C). Plutarch objects that such advice confuses tranquillity with passivity and mistakes the nature of the problem. Idleness is not tranquillity. The absence of activity often produces restlessness rather than calm. Human beings possess impulses toward action, recognition, and participation. When these impulses are suppressed entirely they generate frustration rather than composure. The real difficulty lies not in the quantity of action but in the manner in which action is evaluated and distributed within life.

Plutarch therefore relocates the problem from activity to judgment. The soul becomes disturbed not by events themselves but by its inability to interpret them proportionately. As he observes, “In this way, merely shifting from one mode of life to another does not eliminate from the soul the sources of distress and agitation” (466C). Human beings misjudge the significance of events. They magnify trivial setbacks, interpret ordinary misfortune as catastrophe, and compare themselves incessantly with those who appear more fortunate. In doing so they generate a constant sense of deprivation.

Plutarch illustrates this mechanism with a series of examples. People often believe that happiness belongs to those whose external circumstances differ from their own: the rich envy rulers, rulers envy kings, kings envy the gods. The result is a perpetual upward comparison that prevents satisfaction with one’s present condition. The psychological structure is not unfamiliar. What matters for Plutarch is the interpretive error underlying it. The mind directs its attention toward what it lacks rather than toward what it possesses. The point is that external rearrangements of life – changing occupations, environments, or activities – do not cure inner disturbance. What is required instead is a transformation in the structure of judgment or attention, which fits directly with the Plutarchean idea

that tranquility depends on internal calibration rather than substitution of experiences. For this reason he recommends a deliberate reorientation of attention. Instead of comparing oneself with those who possess more, one should look toward those who possess less. The point is not moral consolation but perceptual correction. By altering the direction of comparison the soul recalibrates its expectations and restores proportion to its judgments.

This discipline resembles the work of a craftsman arranging contrasting elements within a single composition. Plutarch explicitly compares the process to musical harmony. Human life contains both pleasant and painful elements; tranquillity consists in the art of combining them into a coherent whole: “the harmony of the world is a tension of opposites, like that of a lyre or a bow” (παλίντροπος γὰρ ἁρμονίη κόσμου, ὅκωσπερ λύρης καὶ τόξου, 474A). The reference to Heraclitus signals a fundamental point. Harmony does not eliminate opposition but organizes it. High and low notes, pleasure and pain, success and failure all remain present. What changes is their arrangement within the whole. A musician does not remove dissonant tones from the scale but incorporates them into a larger pattern. Likewise the tranquil soul learns to incorporate adverse circumstances into a life that remains intelligible despite them. Plutarch repeatedly returns to this aesthetic analogy. Just as a painter distributes colors across a surface, the mind must distribute attention across the events of life. The common error consists in allowing negative experiences to dominate perception. Human beings, he observes, resemble insects that cling to rough surfaces while ignoring smooth ones. They remember injuries vividly but allow pleasures to fade into obscurity.

Against this tendency Plutarch proposes a deliberate recollection of past goods. Memory becomes an instrument of emotional stability. The wise person does not allow earlier happiness to disappear but re-integrates it continually into present awareness. In this way the past remains available as a source of orientation rather than dissolving into forgetfulness. The contrast between wise and foolish memory appears clearly in Plutarch’s comparison: “But the prudent, by remembering, make even things that are no longer there present to themselves” (οἱ δὲ φρόνιμοι καὶ τὰ μηκέτ’ ὄντα τῷ μνημονεύειν ἐναργῶς ὄντα ποιοῦσιν ἑαυτοῖς, 473C), while the foolish even ignore the present.

Plutarch is emphasizing the ephemerality of the present moment. It touches them only briefly and then vanishes from perception. Those lacking reflection treat what is present and has passed as if it were no longer theirs. The wise preserve experiences through memory, making the past

still present and meaningful within the arc of a life. This capacity gives the tranquil person a temporal depth that the restless lack. The past becomes a reservoir of meaning rather than a vanished sequence of moments. In effect the wise person constructs an extended field of experience within which individual disappointments lose their power to dominate perception.

At this point Plutarch introduces one of the most striking images in the treatise. Human life, he suggests, resembles a game of dice. The throw itself lies beyond our control; what remains within our power is the use we make of the result: "Plato compared life to a throw of dice" (κυβεία γὰρ ὁ Πλάτων τὸν βίον ἀπεῖκασεν, 466BA). The metaphor reinforces the same aesthetic principle already suggested by musical harmony. The distribution of events may not be chosen, but the interpretation of those events remains within the power of judgment. Tranquillity therefore depends less on controlling circumstances than on arranging them intelligibly within the narrative of one's life. From this perspective εὐθυμία becomes something like a compositional achievement. The tranquil life resembles a well-ordered work in which contrasting elements are combined without destroying the unity of the whole. What appears chaotic at the level of individual events acquires coherence when viewed from the perspective of the entire life. Plutarch expresses this idea with unusual vividness near the close of the treatise:

I admire Diogenes, who, when he saw a stranger in Sparta getting himself ready for a certain festival and making much of the occasion, said: "But does not a good man consider every day a festival?" (Ἀγαμαὶ δὲ τοῦ Διογέנוῦς, ὃς τὸν ἐν Λακεδαίμονι ξένον ὁρῶν παρασκευαζόμενον εἰς ἑορτὴν τινα καὶ φιλοτιμούμενον "Ἀνὴρ δ'" εἶπεν "ἀγαθὸς οὐ πάσαν ἡμέραν ἑορτὴν ἡγεῖται").

Human life, he writes, should resemble a festival rather than a lamentation. The world itself constitutes a magnificent festival filled with beauty and order. Yet many people move through it as if trapped in perpetual mourning. Instead of participating in the celebration offered by existence, they burden themselves with resentment and anxiety. The wise person adopts a different orientation. Recognizing that both pleasure and difficulty belong to the structure of human life, he participates in experience without demanding that it conform to impossible expectations. The resulting condition is neither emotional numbness nor euphoric excitement. It is a stable *euthymia* grounded in the recognition that life's goods and evils belong to a single intelligible order. Thus εὐθυμία does not eliminate suffering but restores proportion to it. The tranquil soul continues

to encounter loss, disappointment, and frustration. Yet these events no longer dominate perception because they are balanced by memory and expectation, and realization of life's temporal arc. The remark collapses the distinction between special festive moments and ordinary time. For the virtuous person, the good life already carries a kind of permanent celebratory tone, so that the ethical disposition itself transforms everyday time into something festival-like. This is exactly the sort of line Plutarch likes because it suggests that measure and right disposition make ordinary life aesthetically and ethically complete, rather than dependent on rare moments of intensified pleasure.

4.5. *Tempo, measure, and the public form of attention*

Εἰ πρεσβυτέρῳ πολιτευτέον

If the previous treatises teach the reader how to hear well, how to restrain anger, and how to preserve tranquillity amid the dispersions of fortune, *Whether an older man should participate in political life* gathers those lessons into a broader reflection on the form of a human life as a whole. The question is not merely whether old men remain “useful”, nor whether they deserve repose after long labor. Put in such terms, the problem is already misconceived, as if the end of life were to be judged by the same criteria that govern its middle. Plutarch's deeper concern is continuity. Whether a life long shaped by civic action can reach its conclusion without becoming discordant with itself. At the opening of the treatise, Plutarch describes a common argument that old age marks the natural endpoint of political activity, just as it does athletic competition:

[...] and by seeming to press the point they persuade us that there is some fitting point of cessation not only for an athletic career but for a political one as well (...καὶ δυσωπεῖν δοκοῦσαι πείθουσιν εἶναι τινα πρέπουσαν οὐκ ἀθλητικῆς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ πολιτικῆς περιόδου κατάλυσιν, 785B-C).

Yet Plutarch proceeds to challenge this quasi-biological analogy and immediately reframe the matter. The real danger is not simple inactivity, but the impropriety of abandoning a life-long practice as though it were a disposable burden. One should not, he says, cast aside political life ὥσπερ ἡλικιώτην καὶ συνήθη φίλον, “like an age-mate and familiar friend” (785C). Civic life is not an external occupation that can simply be dropped when

its utility fades. It is a companionship extending across time, one that has shaped the agent's character and given form to his life. To abandon it merely because one has grown older would therefore introduce a break in the life's narrative and tonal continuity.

This formulation already recalls the ethical vocabulary of the previous treatises. In *On listening* the attentive listener must accompany λόγος with active judgment rather than surrender passively to impressions. In *On anger* one learns to resist the deforming excess of anger, while in *On tranquility* the task becomes to inhabit one's own life rather than disperse it through envy and comparison. All three concerns return here on a broader temporal scale. The question is no longer whether this or that reaction is proportionate, but whether an entire life can remain proportionate as it is approaching its end. Plutarch's language is telling: τὰυτό τοῦ ζῆν καὶ τοῦ καλῶς ζῆν ποιησάμενοι πέρας ("making the limit of living and the end of living well the same", 785C). This is not merely a moral commonplace. Its force is aesthetic as well as ethical. A life is well lived only if its limit preserves, rather than disfigures, the form established by its earlier course.

Plutarch therefore distinguishes sharply between two kinds of older lives. It may indeed be absurd for a man who has lived quietly all his life suddenly to enter politics in his final years. Such a figure resembles someone waking from a long sleep only to attempt the most demanding civic tasks without training or habituation (785F-786A). Political judgment, like philosophical understanding, is not acquired by caprice. It is the result of prolonged participation. But the opposite case is quite different. For the man who has spent decades in civic life, retirement may represent not completion but deformation. Law and custom themselves often recognize the special authority of older voices. At Athens, Plutarch notes, the heralds did not summon the youngest or most impetuous speakers first, but rather τοὺς ὑπὲρ πεντήκοντ' ἔτη γεγονότας λέγειν καὶ συμβουλεύειν παρακαλοῦντες: ("summoning those over fifty years old to speak and advise", 786B). Being older is not treated as the exhaustion of action but as the stage at which certain excellences become most visible. Civic life depends not only on strength, speed, or theatrical energy, but on steadiness, foresight, and a capacity to deliberate without panic. These are precisely the qualities that those of an older age, when properly formed, tend to cultivate.

Hence Plutarch can point to figures such as Cato, Pericles, and Agesilaus as instances of the distinctive authority that accompanies experience. Xenophon's praise of Agesilaus captures the point: no youth proved

more formidable to enemies or more beloved by allies than Agesilaus in old age (786D-E). His power lies not in compensatory heroics but in another order of excellence. At this point the vocabulary of the earlier treatises reappears with new political significance. In *On Anger*, perception is distorted by anger and produces an unstable and noisy soul. In *On tranquillity* composure depends upon measure and self-possession. These same qualities become civic virtues. Being older naturally diminishes many of the passions that most disrupt public life: ὦν τὰ μὲν ἀνίησι καὶ παραμβλύνει, τὰ δ' ὅλως ἀποσβέννυσι καὶ καταψύχει τὸ γῆρας (“Of these things, old age relaxes and dulls some, while it completely extinguishes and cools others”, 789B). This cooling is not mere decline. It frees deliberation from the disturbances of rivalry, ambition, and faction and the heat of youth. The result is a steadier civic temperament, less susceptible to the feverish impulses that dominate political life in youth.

Plutarch’s most illuminating analogy comes when he compares political activity to musical performance. If one were obliged to sing throughout life, he suggests, one would not pursue the same strained register at every stage, but would adjust one’s mode to what remains fitting. So too in politics one must not abandon action altogether, but adapt it: οὐκ ἀφετέον τὴν πρᾶξιν ὥσπερ τινὰ λύραν σύντονον, ἀλλ’ ἀνετέον ἐπὶ τὰ κοῦφα καὶ μέτρια καὶ προσωδὰ πρεσβύταις πολιτεύματα μεθαρμοπτομένους (“One must not abandon action as though laying aside a tightly strung lyre; rather, one should relax the tension and retune it toward lighter, more moderate, and more fitting forms of political activity for the elderly”, 794A-B). The metaphor alters the tempo and register of civic action without abolishing it. The point is not that one ceases to act, but that one continues to act in key. From this perspective the role of the elder statesman becomes clear. He relinquishes the most strenuous and theatrical tasks while remaining active wherever judgment, authority, and experience matter most. Indeed Plutarch repeatedly emphasizes the educational dimension of such participation. Political wisdom is not transmitted by abstract doctrine alone. It is learned through proximity to those who already possess it. Thus the older statesman guides the young ἐργοῖς ἅμα καὶ λόγοις (“by deeds as well as by words”, 798A). Political knowledge unfolds across generations as a form of apprenticeship, not merely in argument but in bearing, timing, and civic style. Youth often brings ambition, rivalry, and the desire for prominence. Old age tempers these impulses:

Thus the caution of old age, when mixed with the youth that seethes in the public assembly – intoxicated by reputation and ambition – removes what is frenzied

and excessively unrestrained (οὕτως εὐλάβεια γεροντική κεραννυμένη πρὸς ζέουσιν ἐν δήμῳ νεότητα, βακχεύουσιν ὑπὸ δόξης καὶ φιλοτιμίας, ἀφαιρῇ τὸ μανικὸν καὶ λίαν ἄκρατον, 798C).

Plutarch is describing the political symbiosis of age and youth: the energetic, fame-seeking impulses of youth are tempered by the measured caution of old age, producing a more balanced civic life. The imagery blends political heat (ζέουσιν) with sympotic mixing (κεραννυμένη) and Bacchic frenzy (βακχεύουσιν) to depict how elder restraint moderates youthful excess. What emerges is not simply moral discipline but a different style of civic presence. The old statesman's speech is less urgent but more authoritative. His judgment carries weight because it has been tested by time and cleared of many of the passions that earlier distort action.

Plutarch therefore closes the treatise by returning to what truly belongs to the city. The city does not chiefly possess our hands, feet, or bodily vigor. It possesses, above all, "ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς κάλλη, δικαιοσύνη καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ φρόνησις" (the soul and the beauties of the soul: justice, moderation, and prudence, 799D). These qualities ripen slowly and often appear most clearly in old age. To withdraw from civic life precisely when they have reached maturity would therefore represent not a fitting culmination but a failure of form. In that sense the treatise allows us not merely add a further ethical recommendation to the sequence of Plutarch's other treatises, it gathers them into a view of life as something whose value depends upon proportion across time. A life trained to listen well, to restrain anger, and to cultivate tranquillity acquires as it grows older a distinctive civic beauty. Its tempo slows, its ambitions soften, and its speech becomes more measured. Yet this transformation does not diminish the life's significance. It reveals, rather, the deepest convergence in Plutarch between ethics and aesthetics. A life whose perceptions, passions, and practices have been educated into measure can move toward its conclusion without discord, preserving continuity throughout its beginning, middle, and end. Seen in this light, the political reflections of *Whether an older man should participate in political life* bring the structure of lives into its clearest relief. Once responsiveness is judged according to proportion rather than amplitude, the transformation of tempo that accompanies growing older no longer appears simply as loss. The slowing of reaction that belongs to later life can instead become the condition under which judgment regains scale and civic deliberation regains intelligibility. What had seemed decline begins to appear as recalibration.

Aging in Plutarch's account, does not diminish the aesthetic form of a life but brings into view the proportions that were implicit within it from the beginning.

5. *Plutarch and the recalibration of aesthetic life*

What emerges from these treatises is therefore not merely a set of ethical prescriptions but something closer to an aesthetic understanding of the arc of human development. Taken together, they trace the gradual formation of a life whose responsiveness acquires shape over time. Attention, affect, speech, and action each undergo their own forms of correction as experience unfolds. The young learn to listen before they speak, impulsive adults learn to restrain the contractions of anger, while the restless learn the steadier satisfactions of tranquillity. Those who become older discover how a slower tempo can render judgment more legible to others. These transformations do not mark discrete moral achievements so much as successive recalibrations of attention from the longer perspective of an entire life. Earlier intensities are not repudiated but taken up into a wider rhythm in which experience becomes proportionate to time itself. What comes into view, therefore, is the possibility that the ethical and the aesthetic converge most fully not in isolated moments of excellence, but in the intelligible arc of a life whose responsiveness remains recognizably its own across the changing tempos and vicissitudes of life's experiences.

Seen in this light, Plutarch's treatises disclose an alternative metric of aesthetic life. Much contemporary aesthetic theory tends to evaluate experience according to the vividness or intensity with which individual episodes are felt. The highest forms of aesthetic experience are therefore often described in terms of absorption, capture, or immersion. Plutarch's reflections repeatedly suggest a different evaluative orientation. Instead of asking how intensely an experience is registered at a given moment, he asks whether responsiveness remains proportionate to the life within which those episodes occur. The attentive listener described in *On listening*, for example, does not surrender to discourse as to a spectacle. The mind must be kindled and directed as it accompanies the unfolding λόγος with a measured responsiveness that preserves judgment rather than dissolving it into passive absorption. Engagement is preserved, but enchantment understood as passivity is rejected.

Once this shift becomes visible, aesthetic experience itself appears within an extended temporal frame. In this respect Plutarch's reflections converge with a line of argument that has recently re-emerged in contemporary moral philosophy. In *One life to lead. The mysteries of time and the goods of attachment*, Samuel Scheffler argues that evaluative standards cannot be understood independently of the temporal structure of human life. Scheffler's language of "temporal dissonance" helps sharpen what is at stake in the present argument (Scheffler 2025: 101-24). The difficulty is not simply that human beings occupy time, nor merely that they remember the past imperfectly and anticipate the future anxiously. It is that they must understand themselves at once as creatures who persist diachronically and as beings who are nevertheless confined, at every moment, to the lived present. That tension matters aesthetically because it shows why the value of experience cannot be identified with the force of isolated moments alone. A life is never given all at once, and yet it is not merely a heap of punctual episodes either. It is held together through memory, anticipation, embodiment, habit, recognition by others, and the practical activity of leading one's life across time. Scheffler's point is thus deeply consonant with Plutarch's arguments about how finite beings inhabit temporality without losing the sense of a life as a whole. What Plutarch adds is a vocabulary of measure for that inhabitation. He shows that the question is not how to intensify each present moment, but how to preserve a fitting relation among past, present, and future so that responsiveness remains proportionate to a life one can still recognize as one's own. He clarifies why the present, taken by itself, is never enough and is too thin a slice to bear the weight of a human life. Yet this fact does not force us into fantasy, nostalgia, or a futile desire to escape temporality altogether. This is where Nagel's notion of the "extended" or nonpunctual standpoint can be brought into especially fruitful contact with Plutarch. For as he observes in his discussion of Scheffler's book (Nagel 2026), human beings inhabit time not merely as a succession of discrete moments but as lives extended across past and future, within which memory, anticipation, and attachment shape the significance of what occurs. Ideals of strict temporal neutrality therefore prove unstable. The value of experiences cannot be assessed independently of their position within the history of a life and the attachments that sustain it. Plutarch's reflections may be read as an early genealogy of this insight. What his treatises repeatedly emphasize is that responsiveness is never evaluated in abstraction from the life within which it occurs. The alternative is not to abolish the moving present, but to situate it within a more inclusive

order of reflection in which moments derive significance from their place in an unfolding life. Plutarch's ethical-aesthetic insight can then be stated more precisely. He is not recommending compensation for decline, nor merely shifting attention from extraordinary peaks to ordinary pleasures. He is articulating a form of attunement in which experience becomes intelligible through temporal proportion. One learns to receive the present without overburdening it, to remember without becoming imprisoned by loss, and to anticipate without demanding from the future a perpetual intensification of life. On such an account, the beauty of a human life comes into view neither at the level of momentary vividness nor at that of abstract retrospection alone, but in the achieved relation between phases of life that, taken together, form something like an arc rather than a series of disconnected excitations.

This temporal perspective also alters how the transformations associated with growing older are understood. Simone de Beauvoir famously observed that old age is frequently experienced as a form of social otherness imposed by the young, who project upon it narratives of decline that conceal the partiality of their own standpoint (*The coming of age*). Something similar may occur within aesthetic theory when the youthful profile of responsiveness becomes the unexamined baseline of aesthetic vitality. Against this background Plutarch repeatedly suggests that middle or later life do not merely inherit heightened or diminished capacities but each cultivates distinctive forms of aesthetic clarity. The pleasures appropriate to age are not substitutes for earlier excitements but modes of excellence with their own integrity. Measured speech replaces declamation, deliberation replaces impulsive reaction, and attentiveness becomes less turbulent but more discerning. What appears as attenuation when measured against youthful intensity may instead mark the emergence of a capacity for proportion and other marks of aesthetic value.

The conceptual vocabulary that underlies this perspective belongs to a familiar Greek tradition in which beauty is associated with measure (μέτρον), proportion (συμμετρία) and the right time (καιρός). In this framework ugliness does not arise simply from weakness or lack, but from a disturbance of proportion within a larger configuration. Plutarch's reflections extend these classical principles beyond the evaluation of objects into the temporal structure of life itself. Responsiveness becomes beautiful when it remains proportionate to the circumstances and to the whole within which those circumstances occur, while aesthetic failure arises when a single im-

pulse overwhelms the configuration of the life to which it belongs. Measure in this sense is not merely a restraint imposed upon desire, but a principle of aesthetic organization through which experiences acquire form.

6. Conclusion: measure, time, and the shape of a life

Modern aesthetic theory has become increasingly sophisticated in describing the temporal structure of attention. It can explain how engagement unfolds, how artworks sustain absorption, and how perception becomes organized through shifting patterns of salience. Yet the prevailing vocabulary of aesthetic success of being seized, absorbed, and vividly engaged quietly presupposes a model of responsiveness that operates at relatively high amplitude. The difficulty is not that such experiences are misdescribed. It is that they tend to function as an implicit standard against which other forms of responsiveness appear diminished.

The ancient tradition examined here suggests a different calibration. Democritus resists escalation in the name of εὐθυμία, a condition in which the movements of the soul remain proportionate to circumstance. Plato disciplines pleasure so that it becomes aligned with measure and civic order rather than unregulated intensification. Aristotle observes that responsiveness itself possesses a temporal profile, shifting across the stages of life. Plutarch gathers these strands and renders them visible in the practices of everyday living. In listening, in the management of anger and the cultivation of tranquillity, and in the measured tempo of civic participation, he repeatedly evaluates responsiveness by reference to proportion rather than escalation.

Seen in this light, the deeper issue concerns the temporal horizon within which aesthetic judgment becomes intelligible. If aesthetics is to describe the experience of finite beings rather than permanently youthful perceivers, it must account not only for the intensification of attention but also for its modulation across time. The Plutarchian vocabulary of proportion, fittingness, temporal rightness, and successor pleasure offers precisely such philosophical resources, not as nostalgia for an ancient sensibility but as a way of articulating how responsiveness can remain intelligible across the course of a life.

Samuel Scheffler describes a related difficulty as a problem of temporal dissonance. Human beings understand themselves both as persisting agents with extended lives and as creatures who exist only within the narrow window of the present moment. Most of one's life lies either in

the past or in the future, beyond direct experiential reach, and yet the project of leading a life requires that these dispersed moments be integrated into a coherent self-understanding. Memory, anticipation, embodied continuity, social recognition, and routine practices all help sustain this sense of persistence across time. The resulting tension between present experience and the broader trajectory of a life is not a metaphysical puzzle but a practical and psychological one: the challenge of living in a way that renders the diachronic structure of a life intelligible to itself.

This perspective helps clarify the significance of the ancient calibration of responsiveness. What the Plutarchian tradition preserves is not simply a catalogue of ethical recommendations but a different way of understanding how experiences acquire significance over time. The aesthetic dimension of human life cannot be located solely in moments of heightened attention or vivid perception. It also emerges in the ways experiences are remembered, anticipated, integrated, and reassessed as a life unfolds. To evaluate experience exclusively by the intensity of its present moment is therefore to overlook the diachronic conditions under which experience becomes meaningful within a life. From this perspective, aesthetics concerns not merely the vividness of particular episodes but the intelligibility of a life considered as a temporal whole. Experiences gain significance not only through their immediate force but through the relations they sustain with earlier and later moments. What matters is the proportion through which pleasures, judgments, and expectations remain coherent when viewed across the unfolding trajectory of a life.

If Scheffler is right that human self-understanding is structured by a tension between the immediacy of the present and the persistence of a life extended across time, then aesthetics must also reckon with that tension. What Plutarch's reflections suggest is that the beauty of a life does not lie in the saturation of isolated moments, but in the proportion through which experiences remain intelligible when viewed across the whole trajectory of living. Aesthetic theory, if it is to describe the experience of finite lives rather than idealized moments of attention, must therefore reckon not only with the intensification of experience but with the temporal forms through which a life gradually becomes intelligible to itself.

Bibliography

Primary Ancient Texts

Aristotle, *The complete works of Aristotle*, ed. by J. Barnes, 2 vols, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984. (Contains *Rhetoric* II.12-14; Engl. transl. W. Rhys Roberts).

Democritus, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. by H. Diels, W. Kranz, Berlin, Weidmann, 1952 (Standard DK numbering for Democritus fragments).

Plato, *Republic*, Engl. transl. G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1992.

Plato, *Laws*, Engl. transl. T.J. Saunders, Loeb Classical Library 187-192, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1994-2004.

Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. 1, Engl. transl. F.C. Babbitt, Loeb Classical Library 197, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1927. (Contains *De audiendo*).

Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. 10, Engl. Transl. H.N. Fowler, Loeb Classical Library 321, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1936. (Contains *An seni respublica gerenda sit*).

Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. 6, Engl. transl. W.C. Helmbold, Loeb Classical Library 337, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1939. (Contains *De tranquillitate animi*, *De curiositate*, *De garrulitate*, *De cohibenda ira*).

Contemporary Scholarship

Carroll, N., *Beyond aesthetics: philosophical essays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Cavell, S., *The claim of reason: Wittgenstein, skepticism, morality, and tragedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979.

Cavell, S., *Conditions handsome and unhandsome: the constitution of emersonian perfectionism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Cribiore, R., *Listening to the philosophers. Notes on notes*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 2024.

De Beauvoir, S., *La vieillesse*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970.

Gullette, M.M., *Aged by culture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Irvin, S., *The pervasiveness of the aesthetic in ordinary experience*, "British Journal of aesthetics", 48/1 (2008), pp. 29-44.

Leddy, T., *The extraordinary in the ordinary: the aesthetics of everyday life*, Peterborough (ON), Broadview Press, 2012.

Levinson, J., *Music in the moment*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 1997.

Moss, J., *What is imitation?*, "Oxford studies in ancient philosophy", 36 (2009), pp. 1-49.

- Moss, J., *Poetry and pleasure*, "Oxford studies in ancient philosophy", 43 (2012), pp. 215-51.
- Nanay, B., *Aesthetics as philosophy of perception*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Nagel, T., "Now and then" review of Samuel Scheffler, *One life to lead. The mysteries of time and the goods of attachment*, "London review of books", 48/2 (2026).
- Pappas, N., *Plato's aesthetics*, in *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, ed. by E.N. Zalta, 2008. Substantive revision 2012.
- Porter, J.I., *The sublime in antiquity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Saito, Y., *Everyday aesthetics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Scheffler S., *One life to lead. The mysteries of time and the goods of attachment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2025.
- Woodward, K., *Figuring age: women, bodies, generations*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999.
- Wu, W., *Attention*, London, Routledge, 2014.