

# Plutarch

## A Discourse to an Unlearned Prince

Taken from *Plutarch's Morals*. Translated from the Greek by Several Hands. Corrected and Revised by William W. Goodwin, with an Introduction by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1878).

Some modifications have been made to the text.

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1. Plato, being desired by the Cyreneans to prescribe to them good laws and to settle their government, refused to do it, saying that it was a hard matter to give them any law whilst they enjoyed so much prosperity, since nothing is so fierce, arrogant, and untamable, as a man that thinks himself to be in a happy condition. Wherefore it is very difficult to give counsel to princes in matters of government; for they fear to receive advice as a thing seeming to command them, lest the force of reason should seem to lessen their power, by obliging it to submit to truth. And they consider not the saying of Theopompus, king of Sparta, who, being the first in that country that joined the Ephori with the Kings, was reproached by his wife, because by this means he would leave the kingdom to his children less than he found it; to whom he replied, that he should render it so much the greater, the firmer it was. For, by holding the reins of government somewhat loose, he avoided envy and danger; nevertheless, since he permitted the stream of his power to flow so freely into other channels, what he gave to them must needs be a loss to himself. Though philosophy possessing a prince as his assistant and keeper, by taking away the dangerous part of fulness of power (as if it were fulness of body), leaves the sound part.

2. But many kings and princes foolishly imitate those unskilful statuaries who think to make their images look great and fierce if they make them much straddling, with distended arms, and open mouth. After the same manner they, by the grave tone of their voice, stern countenance, morose behavior, and living apart from all society, would affect a kind of majestic grandeur, not unlike those statues that without seem to be of an heroic and divine form, but within are filled with nothing but earth, stone and lead; – with this only difference, that the weight of these massy bodies renders them stable and unmovable; whereas unlearned princes, by their internal ignorance, are often shaken and overthrown, and in regard they do not build their power on a true basis and foundation, they fall together with it. For, as it is necessary at first that the rule itself should be right and straight, before those things that are applied to it can be rectified and made like unto it; so a potentate ought in the first place to learn how to govern his own passions and to endue his mind with a tincture of princely virtues, and afterwards to make his subjects conformable to his example. For it is not the property of one that is ready to fall himself to hinder another from tripping, nor of one that is rude and illiterate to instruct the ignorant; neither can a person govern that is under no government. But most men, being deceived by a false opinion, esteem it the chiefest good in ruling to be subject to no authority; and thus the Persian king accounted all his servants and slaves except his wife, whose master he ought more especially to have been.

3. Who then shall have power to govern a prince? The law, without doubt; which (as Pindar saith) is the king of mortal and immortal beings; which is not written without in books nor engraven on wood or stone, but is a clear reason imprinted in the heart, always residing and watching therein, and never suffering the mind to be without government. The king of Persia indeed commanded one of his lords that lay in the same chamber to attend him every morning, and to sound these words in his ears: Arise, O king! and take care of those affairs and duties that Oromasdes requires of thee. But a wise and prudent prince hath such a monitor within his breast as always prompts and admonishes him to the same effect. It was a saying of Polemon, that Love was the minister of the Gods, appointed to take care of the education of youth; but it might be more truly affirmed, that princes are the administrators of the divine power, for the safety and protection of mankind, to distribute part of those goods that God bestows on men, and to reserve part for themselves.

Dost thou behold the vast and azure sky,  
How in its liquid arms the earth doth lie?

The air indeed disperses the first principles of convenient seeds, but the earth causeth them to spring forth; some grow and thrive by the means of moderate and refreshing showers, some delight in gentle breezes of wind, and some are cherished by the influences of the moon and stars; but it is the sun that perfects and beautifies all, inspiring them with the principle of mutual sympathy and love. Nevertheless, all these so many and so great benefits, that are the effects of the divine munificence and liberality, cannot be enjoyed or duly made use of, without a law, justice, and a prince; for justice is the end of the law, the law is the prince's work, and the prince is the image of God, that disposeth all things. He doth not stand in need of a Phidias, a Polycletus, or a Myro; but by the practice of virtue makes himself most like the divine nature, and becomes a most delectable object to God and man. For as God hath placed the sun and moon in heaven, as manifest tokens of his power and glory, so the majesty of a prince is resplendent on earth, as he is his representative and vicegerent,

Who doth like God most righteous laws dispense.

I mean such a one as believes that the likeness of God is found in wisdom and understanding, not in the sceptre, the thunderbolt, or the trident, with which symbols of Deity some have vainly caused themselves to be carved or painted, thereby exposing their egregious folly to the world, in affecting that which they are not able to attain to. For God cannot but be incensed against those that presume to imitate him in producing thunder, lightnings, and sunbeams; but if any strive to emulate his goodness and mercy, being well pleased with their endeavors, he will assist them, and will endue them with his order, justice, truth, and gentleness, than which nothing can be more sacred and pure, – not fire, not light, nor the course of the sun, not the rising and setting of the stars, nor even eternity and immortality itself. For God is not only happy by reason of the duration of his being, but because of the excellency of his virtue; this is properly divine and transcendent, and that is also good which is governed by it.

4. Anaxarchus endeavoring to comfort Alexander, who was very much afflicted for the murder he had committed on the person of Clitus, told him, that justice and right sat as assistants by the throne of Jupiter, so that whatsoever was done by a king might be accounted lawful and just; but by this means he indiscreetly prevented his repentance, and encouraged him to attempt the committing the like crimes again. But if we may be permitted to guess at these matters, Jupiter hath not Justice for an assessor or counsellor, but is himself Justice and Right, and the original and perfection of all laws. Therefore the ancients devised and taught these things, that they might thereby show that even Jupiter himself could not rule well without Justice; for she is (according to Hesiod) a pure and undefiled virgin, and the companion of Modesty, Reverence, Chastity, and Simplicity; hence kings are called “reverent,” for they ought to be most reverent who fear least. But a prince ought to be more afraid of doing than of suffering

ill; for the former is the cause of the other; and this is a noble and generous sort of fear, well becoming a prince, to be solicitous lest any harm should befall his subjects unawares:

As faithful dogs, surprised with sudden fear,  
When once they see the savage beasts appear,  
Not of themselves, but of their flocks take care.

Epaminondas, when on a certain festival day the Thebans gave themselves up wholly to drinking and carousing, went about alone and viewed the arsenal and the walls of the city, saying, that he was sober and vigilant that others might have liberty to be drunk and to sleep. And Cato at Utica, when he had called together by proclamation all his soldiers that had escaped the slaughter to the seaside, caused them to embark in ships; and having prayed for their prosperous voyage, returned home and killed himself, leaving an example to princes, whom they ought to fear and what they ought to condemn. On the other hand, Clearchus, king of Pontus, creeping into a chest, slept therein like a snake. And Aristodemus lay with his concubine in a bed placed in an upper room over a trap-door, her mother removing the ladder as soon as they were got up, and bringing it again in the morning. How then, think you, did he fear to be seen in the theatre, in the judgment-hall, in the court, or at a feast, who had turned his bed-chamber into a prison? For indeed good princes are possessed with fear for their subjects, but tyrants with fear of them; insomuch that their timorousness increaseth with their power, since the more people they have under their dominion, so much the more objects they see of dread and terror.

5. Neither is it probable or convenient (as some philosophers affirm) that God should be mingled together with matter that is altogether passive, and with things obnoxious to innumerable necessities, chances, and mutations; but to us he seems to be placed somewhere above with the eternal nature that always operates after the same manner; and proceeding (as Plato saith) on sacred foundations, according to nature, he brings his works to perfection. And as he hath placed the sun in the firmament, as a clear image of his most sacred and glorious essence, in which, as in a mirror, he exhibits himself to the contemplation of, wise men; so in like manner, the splendor of justice that appears in some cities is a kind of representation of the divine wisdom, which happy and prudent persons describe by the help of philosophy, conforming themselves to those things which are of a most sublime and excellent nature. It is certain that this disposition of mind cannot be attained but by the doctrine of philosophy; otherwise we shall lie under the same circumstances as Alexander, who seeing Diogenes at Corinth, and being astonished at his ingenuity and majestic gravity, let fall this expression: If I were not Alexander, I would choose to be Diogenes. For being almost oppressed with the weight of his own grandeur and power, which are the impediments of virtue and ease, he seemed to envy the happiness of a threadbare cloak and pouch, with which the Cynic rendered himself as invincible as he could be with all his armor, horses, and pikes. However, he had an opportunity to philosophize and to become Diogenes in his mind, though he remained Alexander in his outward state and condition, and he might more easily be Diogenes, because he was Alexander; forasmuch as to keep the vessel of his prosperous fortune steady, which was tossed with the winds and waves, he stood in need of a good quantity of ballast and of a skilful pilot.

6. Amongst the mean and inferior sort of people, folly mingled with weakness is destitute of an ability to do mischief; and the mind is vexed and distracted by it, as a distempered brain is with troublesome dreams, insomuch that it hath not strength enough to execute what it desires. But power joined with a corrupt and depraved inclination adds the fuel of madness to the fire of the passions. So true is that saying of Dionysius, who declared, that he then chiefly enjoyed his authority, when he speedily performed what he designed. But herein lies the greatest danger, lest he that is able to do all things that he desires should desire those things that he ought not:

The word's no sooner said, but th' act is done.

Vice, being furnished with wheels by power, sets all the faculties of the soul in a violent fermentation; of anger it makes murder, of love adultery, and of covetousness the confiscation of other men's goods.

The word's no sooner said, —

but the offender is executed; a suspicion arises, — the accused person is put to death. And as naturalists affirm, that the lightning breaks forth after the thunder as the blood follows the wound, but is seen first, since whilst the ear expects the sound the eye discerns the light; so under some governments the punishments precede the accusation, and the condemnation prevents the proving of the crime. Under such circumstances,

No human soul such license can withstand, —

As anchors strive in vain to hold in sand,

unless this exorbitant power be restrained and kept within its due bounds by the force of sound reason. Therefore a prince ought to imitate the sun, which being come to its greatest height in the northern signs, moves slowest, whereby he renders his course the more safe.

7. For it is not possible that the vices and faults of persons in authority can be concealed in obscurity. But as people that are troubled with the falling-sickness, if they walk about in a high place, are seized with a giddiness in the head and a dimness in the sight, which are the usual symptoms of that disease; so Fortune, when she hath a little exalted illiterate and foolish men with riches, glory, or authority, suddenly hastens their ruin. And as amongst empty vessels it cannot easily be discerned which are whole and which are leaky, but by the pouring in of any liquor; so corrupt and exulcerated minds, after the infusion of power, are not able to contain it, but immediately overflow with concupiscence, anger, arrogance, and folly. And what need is there of mentioning these particulars, since the least faults and miscarriages of renowned and famous men lie under the lash of slander and calumny? Cimon was accused for being too much addicted to the drinking of wine, Scipio was blamed for delighting in immoderate sleep, and Lucullus for making too liberal and costly entertainments....