Simply Charlotte Mason presents

CONVERSATIONS ON CHARACTER

PLUTARCH'S LIFE OF DION

by Larry Hunt

"...it is my duty to dwell especially upon those actions which reveal the workings of my heroes' minds, and from these to construct the portraits of their respective lives." —Plutarch

Plutarch's Lives is a wealth of character studies, written in ancient times by a master biographer who wanted his readers to understand who the Greek and Romans were as people. By focusing on stories that show what the hero valued rather than on his accomplishments, Plutarch shines a spotlight on the character qualities of the men of ancient times.

Conversations on Character makes Plutarch accessible for students in fourth grade and up, providing interesting readings, helpful summaries of each section, and discussion questions that guide your student to consider the character of each hero studied. Everything you need is in this guide. The full reading from Plutarch is included, along with questions and narration prompts to spark conversations around each reading. The included companion videos guide your student with a reading of the full text and starting thoughts for the discussion questions.

Give your student the opportunity to grow in understanding character qualities with *Conversations on Character*!

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Conversations on Character: Plutarch's Life of Dion

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PREFACE: WHO WAS PLUTARCH?

Usually, I love a book for its own sake. Something about its characters, plot, and setting captures my imagination and draws me in. But every once in a while, I love a book for the sake of its author as well. For instance, when I read a book by C. S. Lewis or George MacDonald, I feel like I am in the company of a friend and mentor, someone I could trust with my own children.

I feel the same way about Plutarch, and I am not alone. People have loved Plutarch for nearly 2,000 years. Indeed, he is one of the most beloved authors in the entire canon of literature, not merely because of his excellent work as a historian and philosopher, but because readers sense that he was a good man with a genuine desire to improve his own soul and theirs.

We know relatively little about the life of the man himself, which is ironic, given that he is famous for writing biographies. He was born around A.D. 45 in Chæronea, a small Greek city in the Boeotian plain. As a young man, he studied philosophy in Athens and distinguished himself in this discipline for the rest of his life. He even headed his own school in Chæronea where he taught philosophy.

Indeed, it was his work as a philosopher, teacher, and writer that made him quite popular in Rome, where he was invited to give a series of lectures on philosophical topics. While there, he traveled around Italy, sight-seeing and gathering knowledge about the famous Romans who would later appear in his greatest work: *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*.

Plutarch also made a trip to Alexandria, Egypt, which was the intellectual center of the world in his lifetime. The wisdom of Egypt had long fascinated the ancient Greeks, and Plutarch must have been thrilled to explore the wonders of that land.

In spite of these travels, however, and the lure of celebrity, Plutarch was attached to his homeland. He chose to spend most of his life in the little town of his birth, joyfully devoting his active mind to family life, teaching, and civic duty. As a storyteller and historian, he loved the tales of adventure that he chronicled in his biographies, but as a philosopher, he understood that one's life does not need to be epic in order to be noble. He believed that a simple but virtuous life, a life crowned by love, reason, self-control, and humility, is far nobler than that of many a famous king.

In this series, we will be studying the biographies he wrote, known collectively as *The Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* or sometimes, simply, Plutarch's *Lives*. Plutarch himself called the collection *Parallel Lives* because he intended to present his biographies in pairs, one Greek and one Roman. He selected the pairs based on similarities of personality or circumstance. For instance, he paired Theseus, the founder-hero of Athens, with Romulus, legendary founder of Rome. Pairing them like this naturally invites a comparison of the two lives, which Plutarch often did in a concluding section. In these comparisons, Plutarch sifts the best qualities of each person by comparing and contrasting one with the other in the ways that each dealt with similar challenges.

And this gives us some insight into the true purpose of Plutarch's *Lives*.

Although his *Lives* is a useful source of historical knowledge, Plutarch made a very clear distinction between the purpose of his book and that of strict history.

> I am writing biography, not history; and often a man's most brilliant actions prove nothing as to his true character, while some trifling incident, some casual remark or jest, will throw more light upon what manner of man he was than the bloodiest battle, the greatest array of armies, or the most important siege. Therefore, just as portrait painters pay

> most attention to those peculiarities of the face and eyes, in which the likeness consists, and care but little for the rest of the figure, so it is my duty to dwell especially upon those actions which reveal the workings of my heroes' minds, and from these to construct the portraits of their respective lives, leaving their battles and their great deeds to be recorded by others.
>
> Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*

So the essential aim of history is to record the momentous events of the past for their own sake. Plutarch's aim, however, was to present the moral qualities of those who were responsible for such great events, not primarily for their historical value but for their potential to inspire him and his readers to live a good, honorable, and satisfying life. He put it best when he wrote,

> It was for the sake of others that I first started to write biographies, but I soon began to dwell upon and delight in them for myself, endeavoring to the best of my ability to regulate my own life by them, and to mirror the virtues I saw in these great people. By the study of their biographies, we receive each person as a guest into our minds. . . and so train ourselves by constantly dwelling upon the memorials of the great and good, that should anything base or vicious be placed in our way by the society into which we are necessarily thrown, we reject it and expel it from our thoughts, by fixing them calmly and happily on what is noble.
>
> Plutarch, *Life of Timoleon*

This perfectly describes my experience of reading Plutarch's *Lives*, and I hope it will describe yours as well. Plutarch was a skilled storyteller, and his subjects led fascinating lives. As I read about these remarkable people, I feel as though I am living with them, sharing in their adventures, and fixing my thoughts "calmly and happily on what is noble."

But there is one noble life in particular that inspires me whenever I read these biographies, a simple life that does not appear in the collection as such but which gives the whole work its spirit and beauty, and that is the life of its author, who speaks to me over centuries of time to show me how to live well.

A NOTE ABOUT THE TEXT AND TRANSLATION

The translation I have selected for these study guides is that of Aubrey Stewart and George Long, both Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge. Initially, I considered using John Dryden's translation since I first grew to love Plutarch in that translation. I also considered using Thomas North's translation since it has a good reputation and was the version that Shakespeare drew upon for the plays *Coriolanus*, *Julius Cæsar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, but in the end I believe that Stewart and Long's is the best choice.

For one thing, the translations of North (1579) and Dryden (1683) contain many old-fashioned words, making them less accessible to the modern reader. Also, these two are not as accurate as Stewart and Long's translation. North's is a translation of Amyot's French translation, so it is a translation of a translation. The translation called by Dryden's name was in fact the work of a committee, whose members had varying degrees of skill, so while it is "translated from the Greek," Dryden's translation is widely acknowledged to be inferior to North's.

Stewart and Long were both excellent scholars. Their translation is from the original Greek, and its relatively modern (1892) vocabulary is more accessible.

For the most part, the text appears entire and in its original order, but on rare occasions, I may take the liberty of rearranging a few sections for thematic reasons. Also, in a very

few places, I have omitted content that may not be appropriate for younger readers. Where I have changed the text in these ways, I have noted the fact and summarized the omitted sections. Where applicable, spelling and punctuation have been updated to modern conventions.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book can be used on its own or with my video lectures. You can go through all of the readings at whatever pace you like. However, if you decide to skip some, I suggest that you read my summaries of the omitted readings in order to provide continuity.

Each reading is set up in the following way: a preliminary summary, the text of the reading, a narration prompt, and discussion questions at the end.

Summaries

I have written a summary at the beginning of each reading in case the student (or parent) would like to get the essence of the reading ahead of time.

Readings and Narration

I read each of these sections in my videos before I talk about the reading itself. Each reading is around three pages long on average. If you are using my video, you could press pause during the reading, or immediately afterward, to allow the student to narrate what he or she remembers. (See the What is Narration section below.) Once this is done to your satisfaction, you could either return to the video to hear my thoughts on the reading and/or conduct your own discussion with the students. The book provides questions after each reading to help facilitate your own discussions.

Discussion Questions

I do not intend for these sections to be like quizzes over the reading. I only mean for them to invite students to think more deeply about aspects of the reading that seem to be the most important or interesting. Students should not feel bad if they do not know the answers. (Sometimes, the answers are not even directly given in the reading). I will address each of these discussion questions in the video after I read the text.

Companion Videos

Companion videos are available for each installment of the Conversations on Character: Plutarch series and include summaries, a live reading of the text, and the discussion questions. Due to the nature of the language in the translation, it is highly recommended to use the video companion while following along with the text. If you have any questions about accessing the videos through your SCM account, send an email to contact@simplycharlottemason.com.

Maps

Your purchase of this book includes access to maps that will familiarize students with the geography of the stories as well as the logistics of particular events (such as battles). Use the QR code or this short url to access and download the maps: simplycm.com/plutarchs-dion-maps.

WHAT IS NARRATION?

At the end of each of my readings, you are invited to narrate what you heard, so it is important to understand what narration is.

Narration and *intentional reading* are skills that Charlotte Mason emphasized, and I think they are very valuable skills, particularly these days when our ability to focus on a text

deeply has been weakened by the hundreds of shiny promises of entertainment that flash around us constantly.

In order to narrate, you must first read or listen to a reading closely. Here are a few quotations from Charlotte Mason herself that will help get the idea across.

> This habit should be begun early; so soon as the child can read at all, he should read for himself, and to himself, history, legends, fairy tales, and other suitable matter. He should be trained from the first to think that one reading of any lesson is enough to enable him to narrate what he has read, and will thus get the habit of slow, careful reading, intelligent even when it is silent, because he reads with an eye to the full meaning of every clause.
>
> *Home Education*, p. 227

The sort of focus that Charlotte Mason is describing here can be developed while reading on your own or while listening to someone else read. (In Plutarch's lifetime, literature was copied out by hand, which made manuscripts rare. As a consequence, you would probably have *heard* his stories read aloud to you rather than read them yourself, so when you listen to me read aloud, not only will you be developing your ability to focus, you will also be participating in a very ancient tradition.)

After an intentional reading, you have prepared yourself to narrate. When you narrate, you take on the role of storyteller, retelling the events of the story you just heard. Here is how Charlotte Mason describes the practice.

> It is most interesting to hear children of seven or eight go through a long story without missing a detail, putting every event in its right order. These narrations are never a slavish reproduction of the original. A child's individuality plays about what he enjoys, and the story comes from his lips, not precisely as the author tells it, but with a certain spirit and coloring which express the narrator. By the way, it is very important that children should be allowed to narrate

> in their own way, and should not be pulled up or helped with words and expressions from the text. A narration should be original as it comes from the child—that is, his own mind should have acted upon the matter it has received. Narrations which are mere feats of memory are quite valueless.
>
> *Home Education*, p. 289

She has younger students in mind here simply because the skills of close reading (or listening) and narration should be developed early in one's life, not because they have no value for older students.

So if you are using my videos with this study guide, and you want to try your hand at narration, simply pause the video after the reading and narrate. You can do this in whatever way works best: to yourself or someone else, orally, or in writing. Also, if the reading is too long, you could pause the video and narrate once or twice before the end.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. was home to possibly the most influential philosopher of all time: Aristocles. If that name sounds unfamiliar to you, you may recognize him as Plato, a nickname meaning "broad-shouldered," and upon these broad shoulders the Western philosophical tradition securely rests. Even our word *academic* is derived from the name of the school that he founded in Athens, the Academy. Most people have heard about Plato's most famous student, Aristotle, but Plutarch writes that Dion "was by far the most apt of Plato's scholars, and the readiest to follow out his master's instructions in virtue. This we learn from Plato's own account of him."

Dion was a native of Syracuse, on the island of Sicily, and his life was forever changed when fate brought Plato to his homeland. Although very young at the time, Dion's heart and mind were stirred by the wisdom he saw modeled in Plato. From that moment until his death, Dion would dedicate his life to the love of wisdom, to living an exemplary moral life in pursuit of what Plato called *The Good*. Even the bitterness of exile from Syracuse became a blessing when Dion made his way to Athens to study in the olive grove and garden of the Academy under the instruction of his beloved master and friend.

But as Plutarch tells us, circumstance would not permit Dion to lead the life of a reclusive scholar. Being a patriot and statesman, he was eventually called to risk his life, his fortune,

and his sacred honor to lead a desperate war against the tyrant who ruled over his homeland. During this war, he conducted himself with such courage and skill that he actually succeeded in overthrowing the tyrant, whose reign was "the most powerful dynasty at that time existing in the world." And afterward, when all the power, wealth, and glory of the tyrant could have been his, he refused to take them. His only concern was that Plato and his colleagues back at the Academy in Athens would be proud of how he had conducted himself.

When Dion first met Plato, he heard the great philosopher teach that "the life of the just is happy, and that of the unjust miserable." The truth of this statement is borne out in Dion's own life, not that he avoided suffering—far from it. He suffered quite a bit. Betrayed by friends and unappreciated by the very citizens for whom he sacrificed so much, Dion's life has a sad end that draws out our most heartfelt sympathy. We wish things could have turned out differently for him, but his life should not be considered a failure because it ended sadly, for he understood from an early age that to live a life of virtue is the greatest treasure, and he succeeded in doing this like few others have. And through Plutarch's biography, we can make up for the ingratitude of Dion's countrymen by appreciating the beauty of his life and allowing it to inspire us all to be true philosophers and to pursue The Good in our own daily choices.

LIFE OF DION

READING 1

SUMMARY

Plutarch introduces the subjects of his next pair of lives, Brutus and Dion (DIE-on), providing readers with his reasons for pairing them together. He then begins the actual life of Dion by describing the family relations of Dionysius (die-uh-NIH-see-us) the Elder, tyrant of Syracuse and brother-in-law of Dion.

FROM PLUTARCH

Use the video for reading 1 to guide you through the following text:

> We are told by the poet Simonides (sy-MON-ih-deez), Sossius Senecio (SO-shee-us sen-ECH-ee-oh), that the Trojans bore no malice against the Corinthians for joining the rest of the Greeks in the siege of Troy because Glaukus, who was himself of Corinthian extraction, fought heartily on their side. In the same manner we may expect that neither Greeks nor Romans will be able to blame the doctrines of the Academy, as each nation derives equal credit from their practice in this book of mine, which contains the lives of Brutus and Dion—of whom the latter was Plato's intimate friend, while the former was educated by his writings—so that they were both, as it were, sent forth from the same school to contend for the greatest prizes. It is not surprising, therefore, that there should be a great similarity between their respective achievements, or that they should have proved the truth of that maxim of their teacher: that nothing great or noble can be affected in politics

except when a wise and just man is possessed of absolute power combined with good fortune. Just as Hippomachus (hih-po-MOK-us) the gymnastic trainer used to declare that he could always tell by their carriage those who had been his pupils, even though he only saw them from a distance when they were carrying meat home for their dinner, so we may imagine that philosophy accompanies those who have been brought up in its precepts in every action of their lives, adding a happy grace and fitness to all that they do.

Their lives resemble one another even more in their misfortunes than in the objects at which they aimed. Both of them perished by an untimely fate, unable, with all their mighty efforts, to accomplish the object which they had in view. The most remarkable point of all is that they both received a supernatural warning of their death by the appearance to them of an evil spirit in a dream. Yet it is a common argument with those who deny the truth of such matters that no man of sense ever could see a ghost or spirit but that it is only children and women and men who are wandering in their mind through sickness, who through disorder of the brain or distemperature of the body are subject to these vain and ominous fancies, which really arise from the evil spirit of superstition within themselves. If, however, Dion and Brutus, both of whom were serious and philosophic men, not at all liable to be mistaken or easy to be deceived about such matters, did really experience a supernatural visitation so distinctly that they told other persons about it, I do not know whether we may not be obliged to adopt that strangest of all the theories of the ancients that evil and malignant spirits feel a spite against good men and try to oppose their actions, throwing confusion and terror in their way in order to shake them in their allegiance to virtue. Because they fear lest if they passed their lives entirely pure and without spot of sin, they might after death obtain a higher place than themselves. This, however, I must reserve for discussion in another place, and now, in this my 12th book of parallel lives, I will first proceed to deal with the elder man of the two.

Dionysius the Elder, as soon as he had raised himself to the throne, married the daughter of Hermokrates (her-

MOK-rah-teez) of Syracuse. However, as his power was not yet firmly established, the people of Syracuse rose in revolt, and committed such shocking outrages upon the person of Dionysius' wife, that she voluntarily put herself to death. Dionysius, after recovering and confirming his power, now married two wives at the same time, one of whom was a Lokrian named Doris and the other a native of Syracuse named Aristomache (air-iss-TOH-muh-kee), the daughter of Hipparinus (hip-pair-IH-nus), one of the first men in Syracuse, who had acted as colleague with Dionysius himself when he was appointed to the command of the army with unlimited powers. It is said that he married them both upon the same day, and that no man knew which he visited first. And of the remainder of his life he spent an equal share of his time with each, as he always supped in company with both of them, and spent the night with each in turn. The populace of Syracuse would fain have hoped that their countrywoman would be preferred to the stranger, but it was the stranger who first bore a son and heir to Dionysius, to counterbalance her foreign parentage, while Aristomache remained childless for a long time, although Dionysius was anxious to have a family by her, and even put to death the mother of his Lokrian wife on a charge of having bewitched her.

NARRATION

Tell what you know so far of Dion's character.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Why did Plutarch choose to pair Brutus with Dion?

they routed the Minoans, entered their city with the fugitives, and captured it. When the two chiefs met, they embraced one another, and Dion restored the city to Synalus without doing it any hurt, while Synalus showed hospitality to the soldiers and provided Dion with the supplies which he needed.

NARRATION

Tell about the help Dion and his men receive after overcoming hardships on their journey.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

What sort of difficulties does Dion face in this reading, and how does he overcome them?

READING 10

SUMMARY

After learning that Dionysius, by good fortune, has sailed to Italy on other business, Dion's troops urge him to march on Syracuse, the capital. He agrees, and on his way, he begins to recruit soldiers from among the Sicilians, eventually adding 5,000 natives to his initial 800 mercenaries. In Syracuse, word reaches Timokrates (the man to whom Dionysius had given Dion's wife) that Dion is coming. Although he sends word frantically to Dionysius, the message never arrives, and Dion attacks the city. Timokrates flees on horseback and Dion enters Syracuse in triumph to the great joy of its common citizens.

FROM PLUTARCH

Use the video for reading 10 to guide you through the following text:

What specially encouraged them was the absence of Dionysius from Syracuse, although they had no hand in bringing it about, for he had just started on a voyage to the coast of Italy with a fleet of 80 ships. Although Dion begged his soldiers to wait and recruit their strength after the hardships of their long sea voyage, they would not remain there, but in their eagerness to seize this favorable opportunity bade Dion lead them to Syracuse. Dion now left behind his surplus arms and baggage at Minoa, and, begging Synalus to send them on to him when he should have need of them, set out on his march to Syracuse. On the road, he was first joined by 200 horsemen, citizens of Agrigentum, dwelling near Eknomon. After these, some of the people of Gela also joined his army.

The news of Dion's march soon reached Syracuse, and Timokrates, the husband of Dion's late wife, the sister of Dionysius, who was left in charge of the garrison, sent a messenger in great haste to Dionysius with a letter telling of Dion's arrival. He himself endeavored to maintain order and put down all insurrections in the city, for all the people were excited at the news, but remained quiet as yet, through fear and doubt. Meantime a strange mischance befel the bearer of the letter to Dionysius. He crossed the straits to Italy, passed through the city of Rhegium, and as he hurried on towards Kaulonia, where Dionysius was, he fell in with one of his friends, carrying a newly slaughtered victim. He was given a piece of meat by the man, and went on in haste. He walked some part of the night, but being forced by fatigue to take a little sleep, he lay down, just as he was, in a wood by the roadside. While he slept, a wolf, attracted by the smell, snatched up the meat, which he had tied to his wallet, and ran off with it, carrying away with it the wallet in which the man had placed the letter. When the man woke and discovered his loss, after much vain searching, as he could not find it,

he decided not to go to the despot without the letter, but to make off and keep out of the way.

In consequence of this Dionysius only heard of the war in Sicily much later and from other persons, and meanwhile Dion had been joined on his march by the people of Kamarina, and by a considerable number of the Syracusans who lived in the country. The Leontines and Campanians, who formed the garrison of Epipolæ, in consequence of Dion's sending them a false report that he intended to attack their city first, left Timokrates, and went away thither to defend their own property. When news of this reached Dion, who was encamped near Akræ, he aroused his soldiers while it was yet night and marched to the river Anapus, which is ten stadia distant from the city. There he halted and offered sacrifice beside the river, praying to the rising sun, and at the same time the soothsayers declared that the gods would give him the victory. Observing that Dion wore a garland because he was sacrificing, all those who were present at the sacrifice with one impulse crowned themselves with flowers. No less than 5,000 men had joined him on his march. They were badly armed in a makeshift fashion, but their zeal supplied the deficiencies of their equipment, and when Dion led the way they all started at a run, shouting for joy, and encouraging one another to recover their freedom.

Of the Syracusans within the walls, the chief men and upper classes in their most splendid raiment met Dion at the gates, while the populace attacked the friends of the despot, and seized upon the spies, a wicked and hateful class of men, who used to live among the people of the city and report their opinions and conversations to the despot. These men were the first to suffer for their crimes, as they were beaten to death by any of the citizens who fell in with them. Timokrates, unable to reach the garrison of the citadel, mounted his horse and rode away from the city, spreading alarm and confusion everywhere as he fled by exaggerating the numbers of Dion's army, that he might not be thought to have surrendered the city through fear to a small force.

Meanwhile Dion could already be seen plainly, as he marched first of all his men, clad in splendid armor. On

one side of him was his brother Megakles, and on the other the Athenian Kallippus, both crowned with garlands. Next marched a hundred of the mercenary soldiers, as a bodyguard for Dion, while the rest of the men were led on by their officers in battle array. The entire procession was looked upon and welcomed as though it were sacred by the citizens of Syracuse, who, after 42 years of tyranny, saw liberty and a popular constitution restored to their city.

NARRATION

Recall the military maneuverings in this reading.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was Dion reluctant, at first, to march straight to Syracuse?
2. What is your opinion of Timokrates after this reading?

READING 11

SUMMARY

In gratitude for their deliverance from the tyrant, the Syracusans elect Dion and his brother to be generals. For his part, he urges them to cherish and defend their new-found freedom. Meanwhile, Dionysius has learned about what has happened and attempts to bribe Dion, but Dion is unmoved. He offers Dionysius safety if he will renounce the crown. Dionysius seems to agree to this, but secretly attacks the Syracusans. When this happens, the citizens crumble in panic. Only the bravery of Dion (who is wounded in the battle) and his mercenary Greek soldiers saves the day.