HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Plutarch (46 A.D.-120 AD)

Plutarch was born in Boeotia—the home land of Hesiod—in the village of Chaeronia. His father was well to do and Plutarch was destined for a life of writing and travel, beginning with a period of study at Plato's Academy in Athens, from 61-74 A.D. In the course of traveling he twice visited Rome—which was by this time the metropolitan center for the Greeks, who had been conquered by the Romans—and became a Roman citizen. Despite constant travel, and citizenship in Rome, Plutarch served as a Priest of Apollo in the Temple of the Oracle at Delphi, served vigorously in local and national politics, and above all delighted in hosting distinguished guests at his family home—and from the comfort of his marble throne.

Plutarch was a voluminous writer, added to which, by luck, most of what he wrote was preserved intact. He was vigorous in both philosophy and in his series of biographies and memoirs, and is especially known for his *Parallel Lives*. In the *Parallel Lives* he writes substantial biographies of such ancient figures as Theseus or Solon or, closer in time, Alexander. In pairing a Greek with a Roman he is concerned to show the relevance and current living importance of the highest Ancient Greek achievers. Although he provides substantial 'historical information,' he writes as a moralist more than as a historian, concerning himself with the small lifestyle issues, tweaks of personal destiny, and evidences of character or weakness which go to compose the whole person.

The philosophical underpinning of these biographies lies in Plutarch's extensive commentaries on Plato, his axis in philosophy. He was particularly absorbed in Plato's *Timaeus*, which is a speculation on the origin of the cosmos. For the Plato, of this dialogue which was to be central to late Mediaeval and Renaissance thinking, the cosmos is born out of un-reason and chaos, but is transformed, by the Master Ordering Principle, into a dialogue of chaos with reason, between which principles there is continual struggle. One sees how this perspective plays into the ethic Plutarch deploys in his *Lives*.

Plutarch was a fountain of wise sayings—

Let us carefully observe those good qualities wherein our enemies excel us; and endeavor to excel them, by avoiding what is faulty, and imitating what is excellent in them.