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# The Selflessness of Parental Love: Plutarch in the Intergenerational Discourse with Representatives of Modern Science

Bezinteresowność miłości rodzicielskiej:  
Plutarch w dyskursie międzypokoleniowym  
z przedstawicielami współczesnej nauki

## Abstract

*The article presents a scientific discourse that revolves around the following question: Can parental love be considered selfless or rather the opposite – self-serving (i.e. resulting from the parents' current or future material or psychological gratifications, as envisaged by the parents)? To this end, the legacy of Plutarch of Chaeronea, a philosopher of antiquity, was drawn upon since it falls well within the scope of the discussed subject matter. Apart from presenting the biographical threads and oeuvre of this proponent of Platonic thought, the article analyses the accusation against people who deny those parents who take exemplary care of their children the right to be considered selfless, as formulated in Plutarch's work titled *On affection for offspring*. A polemic is undertaken here not only with Epicurean views, but also with assumptions held by representatives of selected psychological theories, such as for instance psychoanalysis, in which the unconditional nature of parental love for children is undermined. The cognitive aim of the present research is expressed in the consideration of Plutarch's views on the selflessness of parental love in the context of contemporary scientific developments. The presentation of his evidence supporting selflessness of parental love is complemented by the arguments delivered by the authoress of the article, which may prove valuable especially in the field of social sciences and family sciences. Through the use of hermeneutic methods, the authoress was able to*

*conduct a pertinent analysis and interpretation of the sources. The conclusion was drawn that parental love goes beyond the framework of the maternal instinct, thus testifying to the moral greatness of man, who – as the authoress of the article is convinced herself – emulates God's selfless and unconditional love towards people.*

**Keywords:** Plutarch, parental love, selflessness, intergenerational dialogue, hermeneutics.

## Abstrakt

W artykule zaprezentowano dyskurs naukowy sprowadzający się do pytania: czy miłość rodzicielską można uznać za bezinteresowną, czy przeciwnie – za niebezinteresowną (to znaczy wynikającą z bieżących bądź przyszłych, czyli przewidywanych przez rodziców gratyfikacji materialnych bądź psychicznych)? W tym celu skorzystano z dziedzictwa filozofa starożytności: Plutarcha z Chajronei, które wpisuje się w tę problematykę. Oprócz przedstawienia wątków biograficznych i dorobku tego zwolennika myśli platońskiej, podano analizę sformułowane w dziele Plutarcha *O miłości rodzicielskiej* oskarżenie tych, którzy odmawiają bezinteresowności rodzicom przykładowie opiekującym się potomstwem. Podjęto polemikę nie tylko z poglądami Epikura, lecz także z założeniami przedstawicieli niektórych teorii psychologicznych, choćby psychoanalitycznej, w której podważa się bezinteresowność miłości rodziców do dzieci. Cel poznawczy badań wyraża się zatem w rozpatrzeniu poglądów Plutarcha na bezinteresowność miłości rodzicielskiej w kontekście współczesnych osiągnięć naukowych. Prezentację jego dowodów, potwierdzających bezinteresowność miłości rodzicielskiej, uzupełniono argumentami autorskimi, które mogą okazać się wartościowe zwłaszcza w dziedzinie nauk społecznych oraz nauk o rodzinie. Pośłużenie się metodami hermeneutycznymi umożliwiło odpowiednią analizę i interpretację źródeł. Sformułowano konkluzję, że miłość rodzicielska wykracza poza ramy instynktu macierzyńskiego, stając się świadectwem wielkości moralnej człowieka, który, w przekonaniu autorki artykułu, wzoruje się na bezinteresownej i bezwarunkowej miłości Boga względem ludzi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Plutarch, miłość rodzicielska, bezinteresowność, dialog międzygeneracyjny, hermeneutyka.

## 1. Introduction

The text presents the issue of parental love because this thematic fragment of Plutarch's legacy fits perfectly into contemporary scientific discourse, taking place especially in psychology and pedagogy. Other scientific disciplines

such as philosophy, anthropology, sociology or theology have not escaped it either. This discourse boils down to the following question: Can parental love be considered selfless or rather the opposite – self-serving (resulting from the parents' current or future, i.e. anticipated, gratifications, be it material or psychological ones)?

This question can be analysed by adopting either a subjectivist (a.k.a. ontogenetic, individualist)<sup>1</sup> or an objectivist (a.k.a. phylogenetic) position. Plutarch, though, represents the objectivist view. According to him, every human being<sup>2</sup>, as an individual, is capable of higher feelings, among which love takes precedence, and one of the constitutive features of love is selflessness. Love for other people eradicates egoism, i.e. excessive concentration on oneself and one's own well-being.

Examining the dilemma of selflessness (or self-interest) of parental love seems relevant from both a scientific and social or moral point of view. This analysis can contribute significant cognitive content to the understanding of human nature, the fundamental motivations of human beings and the values they profess. Indeed, parental love is sustained and developed by numerous axiological qualities, such as dignity, devotion, sacrifice, self-denial, kindness, generosity, magnanimity, generosity, patience, and loyalty. The multitude of polemics that have taken place on this topic from antiquity to the present day testifies to the social interest in this issue and its considerable importance in science. Despite the ongoing public debates (including academic discussions) that raise questions of parental love and selflessness and their opposites, these issues have not been sufficiently explored in pedagogy.

The subject of the research presented in this article, therefore, became Plutarch's views on parental love (and – in particular – on one of its characteristics, i.e. selflessness) considered in the context of contemporary scientific developments in the field, made possible by intergenerational dialogue. The text proposes to pose and answer the following research problems: What view of parental love does Plutarch represent (does he consider love to be selfless or the opposite)? What arguments did the philosopher use in outlining his intellectual position on the selflessness of parental love? What is the scientific status of his view against

<sup>1</sup> The subjectivist position, especially in psychology, is summarised in the belief that every person is different and therefore, he or she perceives themselves and their environment differently. According to this position, one person will be capable of selfless or unconditional love, while another will not. This is determined by a number of factors that affect a person most strongly in the initial period of ontogenesis, i.e. personal development.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that in this case one abstracts from individuals who do not reach the intellectual, social or psychological norm. Indeed, it is not the development of an individual that is analysed here, but the development of the species.

the background of contemporary research findings, especially when it comes to psychology? The cognitive objective of the present research is expressed in the consideration of Plutarch's views on the selflessness of parental love in the context of contemporary scientific developments. The praxeological objective, on the other hand, refers to supporting the family through the correct perception of the importance of its cohesion or resilience. The use of hermeneutic methods: pre-interpretation, essential interpretation, coordinated interpretation and contextual interpretation (Grondin, 2007; Lorenc, 2019; Przyłębski, 2019; Mierski, 2011; Jeanrond, 1999) allowed for an appropriate analysis and interpretation of primary sources, i.e. the works of Plutarch, and secondary sources, i.e. studies of his oeuvre.

I hope that both the present research and its possible continuation will soon contribute to enriching the resources not only of family pedagogy, but also of other sub-disciplines of pedagogy, such as the history of upbringing and pedagogical thought, social pedagogy, general pedagogy as well as the theory of upbringing. The new findings shall also benefit representatives of an interdisciplinary area of cognition, i.e. pedagogical ethics. Biographical motifs related to Plutarch and his achievements are also likely to be of interest to researchers of pedagogical biography. The argumentation presented herein may prove valuable primarily to academics (representatives of the social sciences, humanities and family sciences), but also helpful to practitioners, such as family assistants or therapists.

## 2. Selflessness and love – lexical clarifications

In the initial section of this article, it is worth clarifying the concepts that underpin the present analyses. These include the concept of selflessness and the concept of love. In philosophical terms, selflessness refers to a quality of human action (as well as a characteristic of motives and feelings) whose aim is not the subject's own benefit, but the good of another person (Maryniarczyk, ed. *et al.*, 2012, p. 367). This is reflected in the following sentences: The townspeople rushed to the refugees' aid selflessly; They were shown selfless hospitality. A selfless person is someone whose actions are guided by concern for others or the good of the cause, rather than by his or her own benefit or pleasure (Bańko, ed., 2017, p. 82). The term which usually serves as a synonym for selflessness is altruism. Selflessness also constitutes a human virtue (in other words: a positive disposition) and undergoes a thorough

examination in aretology. In pedagogical and psychological terms, selflessness is considered to be a desirable trait of a person's character or personality, a trait that is infrequent in the modern world where relationships based on economic exchange are becoming increasingly numerous. Notably, the terms that constitute opposites of selflessness are self-interest, (cold) calculation and mercantilism. In the societies of the 21st century, it is not only the exemplary parental care of children, based on unconditional and selfless love, which needs to be protected, but also reliable and credible scientific and media coverage of it, free from distortions and stereotypes.

The second key concept in this text is love, seen as the strongest and noblest emotional bond uniting people, the act that refines a person as well as the most essential among the theological virtues (next to faith and hope). Love (in Latin: *amor, dilectio, caritas*) consists in the affirmation of a person and the desire for that person's good. It thus constitutes: firstly, the fundamental act of will directed towards the good as the goal and motive of human action; and secondly, the fundamental manifestation of every being's pursuit of its inherent goodness (Gudaniec, 2016, p. 592; St Thomas Aquinas, 2020, p. 362). Love is also regarded as an intense feeling of affection towards a particular person or as an enduring sentiment felt for a person (a parent, in this case), combined with a desire to be with that person and a concern for their happiness or satisfaction (Reber and Reber, 2008, p. 393).

Among others, the following types of love can be distinguished: human love towards God; interpersonal love: parental love, love towards siblings, marital love, love of the third generation towards grandchildren, tutelary love (for example of a teacher towards pupils); love towards other creatures (for example animals). It is possible that other types of love can also be discerned, such as love for the homeland or nature, but these shall not be analysed here. This article will focus on parental love understood as the love of parents for their offspring.

### 3. Self-serving love. Opposing views to Plutarch's position

The conviction that parental care is self-interested (in terms of gratification, not so much material as psychological) threatens, in my view, the understanding of love as a unique interpersonal emotional bond and heralds a gradual loss of the capacity for it. Assuming that parents' love for their children is self-inter-

ested, it would also have to be acknowledged that its purpose is to obtain tangible benefits, and that in its genesis, the parents' benefits derived from having and caring for their offspring play the most significant role. In this case, the use of the term 'love' would have to be abandoned. Indeed, some scholars attempt to do so by using substitute terms to denote this unique relationship between parents and children, such as 'an emotional bond' (Cudak, 2012) or 'a family bond' (Więckiewicz, 2010), 'an intergenerational bond' (Świątkiewicz, ed., 2012), 'a caring relationship' (Dąbrowski, 1996), 'a close relationship' (Myers, 2015) or 'an interpersonal relationship', including 'a parental relationship' (Dwyer, 2005), 'an attachment' (Bowlby, 2016; Płopa, 2015) or 'parental feelings' (Reber and Reber, 2008). While I do not deny the importance of the aforementioned terms or the necessity of their use in certain situations, I do question the attempt to treat them as substitutes for the term 'love'. Moreover, there is no mention of the gratuitousness of relationships, feelings or emotional states in the content of the corresponding terms.

Intellectual positions held by the philosopher Epicurus (Stokes, 2007, pp. 31–33; Laertios, 1988, pp. 585–658; Legowicz, 1986, pp. 297–335) – the author of the work 'On Love' – or psychologists, among them such representatives of classical psychoanalytic theory as Sigmund Freud (Jacobs, 2006) and his continuator and representative of psychosocial theory Karen Horney<sup>3</sup>, who assume that parental love and caring for offspring are not selfless, are in my opinion insufficiently justified and therefore scientifically questionable. These positions mainly take into account the benefit granted to parents through the transmission of their genetic material<sup>4</sup> and the expansion of their personality through the birth of their children. Nor is the idea of safeguarding oneself through the care provided by children in old age or in the event of illness forgotten. Yet, the possibility of passing

<sup>3</sup> Karen Horney has formulated several views that portray love in an unfavourable light. Among other things, she describes a neurotic need for love and approval, involving the belief that people repress their hostility because they are afraid of losing the love of their social environment. This need is characterised by the desire to please people and meet their expectations. Thus, man seeks the good opinion of others and is sensitive to any signs of repulsion or unkindness. The neurotic's need for love can never be satisfied. The more the female or male neurotic receives it, the more s/he craves it. As a result, he/she is never fulfilled. Selflessness as a quality of love is not recognised here (Hall, Lindzey and Campbell, 2013, pp. 163–164; Horney, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Sociology also considers the question of the viability of childcare. The discipline still holds the belief that, in the process of evolution, those childcare mechanisms that increase the chances of passing on genes to the next generation shall be privileged. Parents favour some children over others for the sake of their own reproductive interests. The children who give their parents the best chance of reproduction are therefore favoured. Moreover, children who are cared for by people who are not their natural parents are believed to be at greater risk than children who are cared for by their biological parents. This is because the love of foster or adoptive parents for their children is less likely than that of biological parents (Szlendak, 2015, pp. 60–61). However, these claims seem, in my opinion, questionable and need to be revised in the light of recent scientific developments and psychosocial experience.

an inheritance understood as financial capital developed by the parents (sometimes over several generations) onto the offspring is considered a less important motivation for parental care.

In contrast, the person-centred theory of Carl Rogers (Hall, Lindzey and Campbell, 2013, pp. 446–478) and Abraham Maslow recognises the intrinsic importance of love, but does not emphasise the altruistic nature of this typically human emotion. In Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the third group of needs (in terms of their importance to humans) are the needs for belonging and love, defined as the needs for friends, family and emotional connections with people. According to Maslow, the contemporary development of urbanisation and depersonalisation experienced by the youngest generation in particular may contribute to the deprivation of this group of needs. The failure to meet these needs is the most common cause of maladaptive behaviour and pathology (*Ibidem*, pp. 440–441; Koziellecki, 1996, pp. 261–274).

Positive psychology, on the other hand, emphasises that the capacity to love is beneficial to the survival of the individual and the species because it enables strong, enduring, caring relationships to form, for example between parents and children. The child's bond with his or her parents is the basis for all other bonds devoid of such selfish considerations as the desire to gain reciprocity or approval from the environment or self-satisfaction (Trzebińska, 2008, pp. 83–84). In positive family psychology, love is also included as a virtue or trait that gives rise to the strength of character, especially the determination to care for others and to come to their aid in a climate of intimacy and kindness (Lachowska, 2015, p. 543; Seligman, Parks and Steen, 2004; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, the question concerning the nature of parental love, in which selflessness is embedded, is marked only vestigially.

The author of this article is convinced that the concept of love and its essential characteristics exclude personal interest as a motive for experiencing this higher feeling. A feeling experienced by a person with only self-interest in mind is not love. Selflessness constitutes an intrinsic (nowadays called: constitutive) quality of love. The fact that, as a result of feeling love, certain common goods<sup>5</sup> – be it material or immaterial – are created, has no connection with the selfless nature of love. Nor should one, as it happens in the course of scientific discussions concerning this issue, confuse the intentionality of human love with its self-interestedness. Nor should one equate intentions and motivations with the consequences experienced by a loving person and the aims and plans of parents

<sup>5</sup> Scientists confirm the significance of love in, among other things, the development of the nervous system, especially in the human brain, as well as the immune system (Gerhardt, 2010).

with the effects of parenthood. Perhaps in this way the pitfalls and mistakes involved can be avoided.

The attempt to strip humans of one particularly important value they profess and practice by questioning the selflessness of parental love, is worth considering as an attempt to undermine what is noble and extremely precious in human nature. It is worth realising that this attempt may entail undesirable moral and social consequences both on a local and global scale.

#### 4. Plutarch – an ancient Greek philosopher extolling love

Plutarch was born in Boeotia, around 45–125 BC to a family respected in Chaeronea, which was a cultural centre that brought together the intellectual elite of the time. His father, Autobulus, was famous for his educational skills and, more specifically, for his ability to give his sons wise advice. With his two brothers Lamprias and Timon, Plutarch had a good fraternal relationship. His philosophy teacher Ammonios provided Plutarch with a proper rhetorical education, which allowed him to continue his education in philosophical studies in Athens. Fascinated by Platonism, prevalent in Athens, he considered himself a Platonist till the end of his life (even though he was described as eclectic). It is not difficult to find Pythagorean and Socratic influences in his treatises. However, he was critical of the Epicurean and Stoic intellectual positions. In turn his nephew, the philosopher Sixtus, became a tutor to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Plutarch's wife Timoxena may be known to posterity through a work authored by Plutarch and addressed to her, titled *A Consolatorie Letter or Discourse Sent by Plutarch of Chæronea Unto His Owne Wife as Touching the Death of Her and His Daughter*. Apart from their daughter, the couple also lost two sons. Yet they were left with two sons, whom Plutarch made the addressees or protagonists of his dialogues. He gained knowledge and scholarly experience during his numerous journeys to Italy, Asia Minor, Egypt, and Rome (where he gave public declamations on various issues, and where he also came into contact with the Latin language). As a result of his public activities, he received the honorary citizenship of Rome and Athens (Abramowiczówna, 1977, pp. 7–10).

Plutarch's philosophical legacy is one of the richest left by Greek authors. In fact, it comprises twelve volumes, which is only one third of his output: of the 227 items recorded in the probably incomplete 'Lamprias Catalogue', only 83 have survived (*Ibidem*, p. 10). His output consists of treatises, dialogues and lives. Seeking to show the thematic range of his works, it is worth mentioning the titles of at least some of his writings: *On the Generation of Soul in the Timaeus*; *On*

*the Fortune of the Romans; Roman Questions; Greek Questions; Questions about Nature; Where Are Ideas Located?; On the Fact that Women, too, Should Be Educated; How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend; How to Profit by One's Enemies; Feast Questions; On the Existence of Only One Academy Since Plato; Platonic Questions; On the Fortune or the Virtue of Alexander; Whether Fire or Water Is More Useful; Were Athenians More Famous in War or in Wisdom?; On the Self-contradictions of the Stoics; The Stoics Speak More Paradoxically Than the Poets; On Talkativeness; Marital Precepts; On the Control of Anger; Is 'live unknown' a Wise Precept?; That It Is Not Possible To Live Pleasurably According To The Doctrine Of Epicurus; Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer; On Listening to Lectures; How the Young Men Should Study Poetry; On the Education of Children; On Brotherly Love; On Erotic Love; On Music; Whether an Old Man Should Engage in Public Affairs?; On the Sign of Socrates; Dinner of the Seven Wise Men (Ibidem, pp. 7–26; Żywczok, 2013, pp. 217–218).*

In addition to translations, mention should be made of several Polish studies on Plutarch by authors such as Georgius Kowalski (1918), Tadeusz Sinko (1947), Franciszek J. Śliwiński (1910), Kazimierz Kaszewski (1912) or Zofia Abramowiczówna (1977), who wrote, among others, the introduction to the collection of Plutarch's writings titled *Moralia*.

Plutarch is remembered by posterity as a sage filled with kindness towards people and readiness to help. At the same time, he embodied typical Greek qualities: a sense of humour (Abramowiczówna, 1964), versatility, communicativeness (a storytelling disposition), and prudence, which fostered the adherence to the following two principles: 'nothing beyond measure' and 'everything at the right time'. This article identifies Plutarch as 'one who extols love' because of his inspiring philosophical writings on parental, fraternal and erotic love, which remain relevant today.

## **5. An accusation against those who deny selflessness to parents who provide exemplary care for their offspring**

The diatribe *On affection for offspring* is considered by connoisseurs of Plutarch's legacy to be a work written in his youth, but the argument containing a kind of derision of Epicurus' views rather points to a later period in which Plutarch was already a committed interlocutor in public discourses of a philosophical nature. The purpose of the diatribe is not difficult to unveil: it is to demonstrate that, contrary to Epicurean claims, parental love is not based on the pursuit of self-interest in having offspring, but is an instinct that is always innate and disinterested (Plutarch, 1977, pp. 332–333) as well as axiologically

neutral. Those who, like Epicurus, claim that one only loves his or her children for his or her own sake and that the feeling is mutual in the similar manner should be persuaded to take the opposite view, namely that parental love must be devoid of all demand, of all benefit, and that it must be based on a desire for the sole welfare of one's children.

Against those who maintain that parental love is self-interested (i.e. that it stems from human selfishness) Plutarch formulates an accusation. To this end, he invokes the examples of animals caring for their offspring: '[...] partridges, when, accompanied by their young, they are being pursued, allow the fledglings to fly ahead and attempt to escape, and contrive to fix the hunter's attention on themselves by wheeling close and, when they are almost captured, fly off and away, then again remain at rest and place themselves within the reach of the hunter's hope, until, by so exposing themselves to danger for their nestlings' safety, they have led on the hunters to a considerable distance. And we have before our eyes every day the manner in which hens care for their brood, drooping their wings for some to creep under, and receiving with joyous and affectionate clucks others that mount upon their backs or run up to them from every direction; and though they flee from dogs and snakes if they are frightened only for themselves, if their fright is for their children, they stand their ground and fight it out beyond their strength' (*Ibidem*, p. 339–340).

As, in turn, 'the king-fisher after conception makes her nest by gathering the thorns of the sea-needle and interweaving and joining them together, and makes it round and oblong in form, like a fisherman's creel; and, packing the thorns closely together with the most exact jointure and density, submits it to the dashing of the waves so that, being gradually beaten upon and riveted together, the hard-packed surface may become water-proof ; and it does become hard to divide with iron or stone. And what is more wonderful, the mouth of the nest is so exactly fitted to the size and measure of the king-fisher that no other creature, either larger or smaller, may enter, and, so they say, that it will not admit even the most minute drops of sea-water.' Whereas a female sparrow '[...] feeds her young at the cost of her own hunger, and, though she has laid hold of food for her belly, she withholds it and presses it tightly with her beak, lest she gulp it down unawares' (*Ibidem*, pp. 338–339).

Among the aforementioned animals, the care of offspring can be attributed to exceptional meticulousness. Plutarch connotes these examples with the original statement that 'the love of animals for their children makes the timid bold, the lazy energetic, the voracious sparing' (*Ibidem*, p. 339). If this statement were applied to the human species, one would have to conclude that parental love is a powerful factor in the development of both parents and offspring. Through the

experience of motherhood and fatherhood, people develop important character traits such as bravery, diligence, self-restraint, and certainly also – *inter alia* – conscientiousness, responsibility, patience, punctuality, forbearance.

Continuing his argument, the philosopher writes evocatively: ‘[...] Are we, then, to believe that Nature has implanted these emotions in these creatures because she is solicitous for the offspring of hens and dogs and bears, and not, rather, because she is striving to make us ashamed and to wound us, when we reflect that these instances are examples to those of us who would follow the lead of Nature, but to those who are callous, as rebukes for their insensibility, by citing which they disparage human nature as being the only kind that has no disinterested affection and that does not know how to love without prospect of gain? [...]. Dogs do not love their pups, nor horses their colts, nor birds their nestlings, for pay, but gratuitously and naturally [...]. For it is shameful [...] – that the begetting and the pains of travail and the nurture of beasts should be “Nature” and “a free gift,” but that those of men should be loans and wages and caution-money, all given on condition of a return! [...] Nature has implanted the principles, though crude and imperfect, of cultivated fruits, so on irrational animals she has bestowed a love of offspring, though imperfect and insufficient [...]; but in the case of man, a rational and social animal, Nature, [...] has furnished noble and beautiful and fruitful seeds of all these in the joy we have in our children and our love of them, emotions which accompany their first beginnings’ (*Ibidem*, pp. 341–295).

Plutarch thus argues that man, by virtue of their human nature, has a certain advantage over other creatures, which can be seen, for example, in the specificity of his capacity to love. Their love goes beyond the biological equipment into a maternal instinct, becoming a noble and selfless feeling.

## 6. Evidence for the selflessness of parental love

Plutarch enumerated at least several such pieces of evidence<sup>6</sup>. Herein, it is worth indicating the most notable ones to be complemented with the authoress’s own justifications. Plutarch’s evidence, however, need to be considered first:

- During the period of biological (today we would say prenatal) connection between mother and child, the umbilical cord acts as an anchor to

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<sup>6</sup> Today we would use the term ‘argument’ rather than ‘evidence’. In order to be faithful to Plutarch’s account, I have chosen to use the original term.

stabilise and provide security for the child,<sup>7</sup> like the first lifeline in the turbulence of life. Here is a representative excerpt: ' [...] for the umbilical cord grows at first in the womb, [...] as an anchorage against the swell and drift, a cable and vine for the fruit now conceived that is to be' (Plutarch, 1977, p. 345). After birth, however, the place of the umbilical cord (as a conduit of nutrients for the foetus) is replaced by the mother's warm and tender breast. Plutarch calls the mother's breast a reservoir of nourishment and a cushion for sleeping or soothing the child's tears. He emphasises this as follows: '[T]here are no outflowing streams of milk nor spouts which discharge it all at once' (*Ibidem*, p. 347), but the breast lets the fluid pass through with tiny holes and 'it thus gives a store of food that is comfortable for the infant's mouth and pleasant for it to touch and to grasp' (*Ibidem*). In the philosopher's view, the location of the breasts in the middle of the female body is also not accidental. This makes it easy for mothers to 'kiss and embrace and fondle the infant, the inference being that the end and aim of bearing and rearing a child is not utility, but affection' (*Ibidem*, p. 349). He states unequivocally that 'there would be no benefit in these many kinds of equipment for procreation, or in such ways and means, such zeal and forethought, if Nature had not implanted in mothers affection and care for their offspring' (*Ibidem*, p. 347).

- Immediately after giving birth and while still in the puerperium, the mother feeds the infant tenderly and cares for it, despite her own exhaustion and discomfort and even danger to her life. This is confirmed by the passage: ' [...] the affection for offspring implanted by Nature would bend and lead the mother: still hot and suffering and shaken with her pangs, she did not neglect or avoid her child, but turned to it and smiled at it and took it up and kissed it, though she reaped nothing sweet or profitable therefrom, but received it with pain and suffering' (*Ibidem*, p. 351).
- New-born babies just after birth do not look aesthetically pleasing and should therefore arouse resentment in the mother who has suffered at birth. Meanwhile, the mother, disregarding the new-born's superficiality, manifests her unconditional love for it with a gaze full of adoration and physical closeness: hugging and caressing. Plutarch writes: ' [...] For there is nothing so imperfect, so helpless, so naked, so shape-

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<sup>7</sup> In comparing the umbilical cord to an anchor, Plutarch was inspired by the thought of Democritus.

less, so foul, as man observed at birth, to whom alone, one might almost say. Nature has given not even a clean passage to the light; but, defiled with blood and covered with filth and resembling more one just slain than one just born, he is an object for none to touch or lift up or kiss or embrace except for someone who loves with a natural affection' (*Ibidem*, pp. 349).

- Parents are not motivated by calculating reasons when giving birth to offspring (they do not have in mind taking care of themselves in late old age). Indeed, they would benefit more from pursuing an inheritance than from bearing children. Plutarch explains: 'Yet none the less fathers do not cease rearing children and, most of all, those who least need them. For it is ridiculous if anyone thinks that the rich sacrifice and rejoice when sons are born to them because they will have someone to support them and bury them. [...] [I]f a father had been childless, he would have had more heirs, and heirs unlike his own. For sons feel no gratitude, nor, for the sake of inheriting, do they pay court or show honour, knowing that they receive the inheritance as their due. [...] [I]t is [the childless] whom rich men feast, whom great men court, for these alone do advocates plead gratis' (*Ibidem*, pp. 496-497). Reflecting on Plutarch's statement, it is also worth pointing out that seniors today would have a tangible benefit from being friends with a doctor, nurse or social worker rather than having children of their own.
- Daughters and sons tend to need parental support, care and effort (even if only when it comes to caring for grandchildren) throughout their parents' lives. This is reflected in the words of the philosopher: 'as for man, his rearing is full of trouble, his growth is slow, his attainment of excellence is far distant and most fathers die before it comes. [...] never did Xanthippus hear Pericles harangue the people, nor did Ariston hear Plato expound philosophy; nor did the fathers of Euripides and Sophocles come to know their sons' victories; they but heard them lisping and learning to speak and witnessed their revellings and drinking-bouts and love-affairs, as they indulged in such follies as young men commit' (*Ibidem*, pp. 351-353). The question remains to be asked: What, then, was the payment these parents received for the effort involved in raising their offspring? In Plutarch's time, parents could not even hope to experience a feeling of pride or relief from raising their offspring to be righteous people, because they rarely lived to see their offspring mature. Although the 21st century has seen a positive change in this respect, it is still impossible to predict how long parents will enjoy the company of their children.

- For the sake of their children, mothers and fathers often renounced careers, fame, power, wealth, and abandoned the social lifestyle to which they were accustomed. They did not want to burden other family members, *let alone* strangers, with the responsibility for the care and upbringing of their children, feeling it their duty to take care of their offspring. If, in doing so, they did not neglect themselves and enjoyed their role as parents, their attitude is respectable and not lacking in selflessness. The philosopher writes: 'Many, at any rate, who had many friends and much honour, the birth of one child has made friendless and power-less. Therefore not even toward the acquisition of power is there any aid to be derived from children, but the whole force of Nature exists no less in man than in beasts' (*Ibidem*, p. 355).
- Offspring can be compared, according to Plutarch, to gold deposits in a mine. For if it were not for the natural love of their children, parents would probably not want to put so much effort into caring for, raising and educating them for about two decades. It is a rather unprofitable, albeit meaningful, investment, a second job or even a 'new profession' (Baldo, 2002). Plutarch claims: ' [...] Nature prescribes to all creatures that they should love and rear their offspring, not destroy them. Moreover, as in mines the gold, though mingled and covered with much earth, yet gleams through, so Nature, even in characters and passions [...] reveals their love for their offspring' (Plutarch, 1977, p. 357).
- The afore-enumerated evidence provided by Plutarch deserves to be supplemented by at least a few examples of sacrificial parental love which can be observed in contemporary times; these examples can be deemed as complementary 'evidence'.
- Many a mother and father has died saving their child drowning in the sea, river or lake. Throwing the child ashore with the last of their strength, they did not care whether they had enough strength to save themselves. At the risk of losing their lives, parents also rescued their children from burning or collapsing buildings (damaged, for example, by bombing). Such situations occur almost every day in different parts of the world. Rarely is such behaviour by parents described as heroic, simply because the lifesavers happen to be the closest relatives. However, given that parents' behaviour towards their son or daughter may also be reprehensible, even violent or neglectful, supererogatory acts (Kaniowski, 1999) should arouse the highest social esteem as manifestations of human axiological

greatness (Stróżewski, 2002), irrespective of kinship, affinity, adoption bonds or any other ties.

- During natural disasters that left people impoverished and hungry, mothers would deny themselves food and fathers would work beyond their means to feed their children. The giving up of meagre rations to their children also occurred during World War I and World War II (for example, in the concentration camps of the Third Reich, where people died, among other things, as a result of starvation).
- Throughout the Second World War, families living in the ghetto gave their children to strangers usually from abroad in order to increase their offspring's chances of survival. In spite of the pain of separation and the despair it entailed, parents resigned from enjoying the daily presence and proximity of their children. In order to improve their offspring's lot and provide them with a better future, they even accepted that they would never see their children again.

## 7. Conclusions

The above hermeneutic examination of that part of the legacy of the ancient Greek philosopher Plutarch, which deals with the issue of parental love, made it possible to answer the research questions (posed in the introduction). Plutarch states unequivocally that parental love belongs among selfless feelings. To him, such a quality as selflessness becomes a constitutive feature of love. In his diatribe *On affection for offspring*, he undertakes a polemic against the views expressed by Epicurus, who considered parental love to be driven by the benefits parents anticipate for themselves, rather than resulting from altruism. Plutarch also formulates an accusation against people who deny those parents who take exemplary care of their children the right to be considered selfless. In order to illustrate the nobility of human sentiment, i.e. parental love that is selfless, he refers to the examples of animals that care for their young. However, according to him, parental love goes beyond the framework of the maternal instinct, becoming a testimony to human beings' moral greatness and their capacity for glorious deeds. In her article, the authoress argues that selfless love proves possible because humans model themselves on God's selfless and unconditional love towards humans.

Plutarch formulated the following evidence (arguments) to support the selflessness of parental love, which can also be used by modern scholars.

- The unique bond between mother and child, which is not based on the mother's own predicted advantage, occurs already in the prenatal period. The umbilical cord is the first manifestation of the baby's (prenatal) security and stability in life. Another is the perfectly formed, tender breast of the mother as a 'reservoir of nourishment' and a cushion to sleep or soothe the newly born child.
- Immediately after birth, and in the postpartum period, the mother tenderly attends to her new-born, despite great physical and often psychological discomfort.
- If it were not for selfless and unconditional love, mothers would find it difficult to hold and cuddle their new-born child, who, after all, does not initially look aesthetically pleasing and sometimes arouses resentment in other people.
- While looking after their offspring, parents do not count on their children taking care of them when they are old, because it is impossible to predict either whether they themselves will live to a very advanced age or whether their offspring will survive to the age when they could provide such care (the child mortality rate in ancient Greece was very high).
- The process of raising a child requires so much parental effort that a person deprived of selfless love would not consciously choose to have children.
- Parents would often renounce many personal gains – for example, fame, career, power, wealth – in order to provide care to their offspring and spend more time with them.
- Financially, the birth of children cannot be considered a 'lucrative investment' for parents, as it involves systematic expenses and the need to provide for the young person over many years. However, for parents who love their children, contact with them represents one of the most essential, sense-creating interpersonal relationships.

In the history of science, theories or concepts have emerged that question the selfless character of parental love: in philosophy (e.g. Epicureanism) and in psychology (e.g. psychoanalytic or psychosocial theory; other psychological theories do not adequately highlight the altruistic character of parental love for children). Against the background of these ideas, Plutarch's position (similar to that of St Bernard of Clairvaux<sup>8</sup>) seems appropriately balanced and close to how

<sup>8</sup> 'Love, by its very nature [...] seeks no reward for obedience, sets no bounds to its respect. It is not so with some, not so: but they are moved with fear or avarice' (Bernard of Clairvaux, 2016, p. 100).

parental love is perceived by some contemporary intellectuals, such as St John Paul II.

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