2

The position of *Quaestiones naturales* in the corpus Plutarcheum

This chapter aims to fine-tune the position of *Quaestiones naturales* in Plutarch’s oeuvre by studying which role the genre of natural problems more generally plays throughout his writings. I will argue that in *Quaestiones naturales* Plutarch creates an independent problematic framework for recording his aetiological speculations about particular natural phenomena in an autonomous way (i.e. free from other concerns such as stylistic embellishment and moralising dynamics [see 1.2.]). In an attempt to reject the traditional view that Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* more generally were useful only as sets of notes (ὑπομνήματα) Plutarch drafted for personal use, I will try to demonstrate that they rather provide a medium for thematically sorting out, amassing and discussing all kinds of issues that struck Plutarch as being particularly problematic.

In examining how Plutarch incorporates the genre of natural problems, including specific *Quaestiones naturales* material, in his other writings, I will focus especially on the discursive effects procured by this technique. How does a parallel passage or a scientific digression function in the narrative or argumentative line of a particular text? Which methods are used to incorporate it in that specific discourse? And what are the similarities and differences with *Quaestiones naturales*? Once these and related questions have been clarified, I will zoom in on the compository relationship between *Quaestiones naturales* and *Quaestiones convivales* more in specific\(^1\). The results of these inquiries will form the basis for further research about the intellectual purpose of *Quaestiones naturales*. To this end, I will consider the likelihood of the work’s publication, which I will further develop in chapter three.

### 2.1. Scientific traits in the corpus Plutarcheum

As an intellectual, a teacher, and a true paragon of ancient learning, Plutarch collected and reused any form of knowledge that attracted his personal attention. Any bit of information that interested him was jotted down in the form of personal notes (ὑπομνήματα) [see 2.3.2.]. These would surely serve him well one day, as is, indeed, suggested by the numerous parallel passages and clusters throughout his writings. In his reproduction

\(^{1}\) A problem that, according to F.H. Sandbach, 1965, p. 138, however, “hardly admits of an answer”.
of these materials, Plutarch often tried to iron out what, in his opinion, were the most problematic difficulties. He, therefore, sought explanations for many kinds of topics (e.g., cultural, antiquarian, literary, linguistic, philosophical, scientific etc.), but he also wanted his readers to acquaint themselves with these explanations and, thus, share in the richness of manifold learning (πολυμάθεια).

Even outside of his collections of *quaestiones* Plutarch often confronts his readers with discussions of numerous kinds of problems. However, Plutarch’s treatment of these topics is not always very closely related to the central narrative or argumentative line of the treatises at hand. On the contrary, they often divert the reader from what is really at issue. This does not imply, however, that Plutarch was just ‘massing together useless material of research’ in these passages, as he states himself (cf. *Nic. 1, 5*: οὐ τὴν ἄχρηστον ἱστορίαν ἱστορίαν). Yet, it remains to be seen what their use really was, then. In the *Vitae*, he refers to these kinds of digressions with the notion of παρεκβάσεις; these are, in fact, abundant throughout his entire oeuvre, and are not restricted to the *Vitae* only [see 2.1.3.]. The length of these digressions varies from a single sentence to an entire paragraph, and they often display an ‘aetiological climate’ that strongly reminds the reader of the genre of problems and its typical organisation of knowledge [see 1.1.4.].

The section at hand will mainly be concerned with Plutarch’s natural scientific digressions, but I will also deal with his use of natural scientific exempla (i.e. metaphorical reinterpretations of natural phenomena). We have already briefly dealt with such exempla in the previous chapter (c.q. with their moralising intentions [see 1.2.4.]), but it will become clear here that this use of imagery was an integral aspect of Plutarch’s literary style.

1. Intellectual and literary interest of natural phenomena

As the examples below will show, Plutarch’s scientific digressions concern very similar natural scientific topics as treated in *Quaestiones naturales*. By incorporating such problems in the narrative or argumentative line of several of his writings Plutarch clearly intended to promote his own research to the outer world and, thus, to demonstrate his own argumentative talent. This is not necessarily incompatible with the idea that by sharing this knowledge with his readers he intended to offer some kind

2 Cf. R. Hirzel, 1912, p. 40: “Überall wird den Problemen nachgespürt, die sich in Wissenschaft und Leben darbieten, nicht bloß alten Problemen, sondern auch neuen, die der Augenblick, auch wohl nur der gesellige Scherz erfindet.”

3 See *Alex. 35, 16* (regarding the scientific digression on naphtha; see further) and *Dion 21, 9* (regarding the historical digression on Theste).

4 This concept was coined by J.-M. Pailler, 1998, p. 80, who used it in light of the parallel material between the *Quaestiones Romanae* and the *Vitae.*
of learned diversion (as fellow πεπαιδευμένοι, they would surely appreciate such digressions). Yet, as we will see, apart from having an obvious intellectual interest, these scientific digressions often also serve a specific literary purpose in the organisation and development of Plutarch’s text.

In order to illustrate this, I refer to the particularly intriguing digressions in the introductions to *De Pythiae oraculis* and *De defectu oraculorum*, which by their natural scientific interests deserve specific consideration here. The introduction to *De Pythiae oraculis* (395A–396C) is concerned with the patina of the bronze statues of Lysander and his admirals located near the entrance of the holy precinct in Delphi (cf. also *Lys*. 18, 1). In connection with this topic, the interlocutors discuss the problem of why oil covers bronze with rust⁵. In the introduction to *De defectu oraculorum* (410B–411D), on the other hand, the interlocutors deal with the ever-burning lamp at the shrine of Ammon in Egypt, which, so the local priests report, consumes less and less oil each year: does this imply that the years grow shorter and shorter⁶? I will not deal with these problems in detail here. What matters is that owing to the fact that these discussions are located at the very beginning of the treatises and are not emphatically connected with the main topic at issue (viz. that the oracles at Delphi are no longer given in verse and that many oracles in Greece have passed into disuse respectively)⁷, I believe that this technique provides some kind of an introductory framework, some kind of a *Natureingang* perhaps, for the narrative (I will come back to this)⁸.

The discursive value of these introductions lies in the fact that they at least for a while postpone the central issue that the author intends to treat in these writings by first providing a discussion of a completely different matter. As such, we can rightly speak of a literary and intellectual ‘appetiser’ in view of the intellectual σχολή that is required for the author to produce and for the reader to consume this kind of literature. This σχολή necessitates that the author and reader can take time to divert their attention a bit before getting to business. Starting off immediately with the central argument would not suit the decorum of this kind of literature, nor would it improve the literary verisimilitude that the author is trying to attain⁹.

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⁵ Cf. Ps.-Arist./Alex. Aphr., *Suppl. probl.* 3, 17. For further detail, see J. Jouanna, 1975 and W.A. Franke and M. Mircea, 2005 (with an attempt towards a modern scientific explanation).

⁶ For further discussion, see J. Hani, 1976, pp. 267–268 and E.G. Simonetti, forthcoming.


We are dealing here with dramatic dialogues between real-life persons (rather than with strictly systematic treatises), in the manner of Plutarch’s *Quaestiones convivales* and generally inspired by Plato’s dialogues.

Notably, the discussion about the bronze statues in *De Pyth. or.* 395A–396C begins and ends with a reference to the prearranged sightseeing programme of the guides at Delphi. This does not seem to be of great interest to the interlocutors, who ask the guides to cut short their lengthy stories and readings of every single inscription (395A: Ἐπέραινον οἱ περιηγηταὶ τὰ συντεταγμένα μηδὲν ἡμῶν φροντίσαντες δεηθέντων ἐπιτεμεῖν τὰς ῥήσεις καὶ τὰ πολλὰ τῶν ἐπιγραμμάτων). Since no heed is given to their inquiries, the interlocutors start to discuss matters of greater personal interest (viz. the patina of the bronze statues of Lysander and his admirals), while the guides are left twiddling their thumbs. When afterwards there is a short moment of silence, the guides pursue their routine speeches (396C: Ἐκ τούτου γενομένης σιωπῆς πάλιν οἱ περιηγηταὶ προεχειρίζοντο τὰς ῥήσεις). Once they mention a certain oracle given in verse, the interlocutors interrupt again and start discussing the common quality of the verse in which oracles are delivered in their days – which is the main topic of the dialogue10.

By the repeated interruption of the Delphic guides, Plutarch seems to suggest from the start that the treatise at hand will not just be a systematic, prearranged tour through the precinct of Delphi, but rather a more improvisatory, digressive promenade that leads the reader off-track – that is, off the trodden paths of the subject treated. As such, the purpose of the treatise is to look for new, original ways of approaching the very essence of the prophetic art, gradually unveiling the philosophical-religious power of the Delphic precinct. Indeed, the introductory scene of *De Pythiae oraculis* is literally set at the entrance of the holy precinct, where the very symbolic walk towards the Apollo-temple on the hill begins (cf. *De Pyth. or.* 394E, 402BC). The fact that a starting-point for the discussion is found in the genre of natural problems may be significant for the ‘pre-philosophical’ interest of this type of debate11 [see 3.2.]

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10 The guides cut a foolish figure again in *De Pyth. or.* 397DE, 400DE, 400F–401A, 401E. Cf. also *De E* 386B and the reactions to the accounts of the guide (ὁ περιηγητής) Praxiteles, in *Quaest. conv.* 675EF and esp. 723E–724D.

11 The aetiology – which ends in aporetic silence – seems to suggest that the air at the precinct has unusual properties: it is at the same time dense and compact and tenuous and keen (*De Pyth. or.* 396AC). This may highlight the peculiar character of the precinct’s natural environment (cf. *Q.N.* 23, 917EF) and may perhaps contain an implicit allusion to the prophetic exhalations released at the Delphic shrine (a topic treated at the very end of *De def. or.* 437C–438D).
The same can probably be presumed, then, for the problem of the lamp at the shrine of Ammon, which Plutarch treats in *De def. or.* 410B–411D in a very similar religious framework (viz. at the Delphic precinct, a short time before the Pythian games). Notably, this problem is put forward to the group by the travelling Cleombrotus of Sparta, ‘a man fond of spectacles and learning’ (ἀνὴρ φιλοθεάμων καὶ φιλομαθὴς), who, so Plutarch notes, ‘was getting together a history to serve as a basis for a philosophy that had as its end and aim theology, as he himself named it’ (συνήγεν ἱστορίαν ὅλον ὤλην φιλοσοφίας θεολογίαν ὑσπερ αὐτὸς ἐκάλει τέλος ἔχούσης). The fact that Plutarch mentions Cleombrotus’ literary project seems very significant, since in a very similar way, natural history, and more precisely the discussion of a specific natural problem, serves as a preamble to the philosophical-religious discussion also in his own dialogue. This seems very significant in light of Plutarch’s “effort to reconcile science and religion” in *De defectu oraculorum*.

Another suggestive means to provide some literary-intellectual diversion to the reader is found in Plutarch’s frequent reinterpretation of natural phenomena in an expressive, rhetorical way as metaphorical *exempla*. In *Q. N.* 32, for example, Plutarch deals with the natural phenomenon of palm wood that rises against weight imposed upon it. This problem is explained in a purely physical way in *Q. N.* 32, whereas in a parallel passage in *Quaest. conv.* 724E, it is used as an *exemplum* for the athlete’s well trained body and mind (notably, the palm tree’s natural resilience remained a popular topic well beyond Antiquity in the form of a moral ‘emblem’: see the commentary *ad loc.*). In *Maxime cum principibus* 776F–777A, to give another example, Plutarch compares the teachings of philosophy with the natural powers of the sea-holly (*eryngium*):

τὸ ἠρύγγιον τὸ βοτάνιον λέγουσι μιᾶς αἰγὸς εἰς τὸ στόμα λαβούσης, αὐτὴν τε πρῶτην ἐκείνην καὶ τὸ λοίπον αἰπόλον ἴστασθαι, μέχρι ἂν ὁ αἰπόλος ἐξέλῃ προσελθών· τὸ ἠρύγγιον καὶ μὴν ὁ τοῦ φιλοσόφου λόγος, ἐὰν μὲν ἰδιώτην ἕνα λάβῃ, χαίροντα ἀπραγμοσύνῃ καὶ περιγράφοντα αὐτὸν ὡς κέντρῳ καὶ διαστήματι γεωμετρικῷ ταῖς περὶ τὸ σῶμα χρείαις, οὐ διαδίδωσιν εἰς ἑτέρους, ἀλλ’ ἐν ἑνὸς ὠφέλησεν, ὡς Ἀναξαγόρας Περικλεῖ συγγενόμενον καὶ Πλάτων Δίων καὶ Πυθαγόρας τοῖς πρωτεύουσιν Ἰταλιωτῶν. Κάτω δ’ αὐτὸς ἔπλευσεν ἀπὸ στρατιάς ἐπ’ Ἀθηνόδωρον κτλ.

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12 F.C. Babbitt, 1936b p. 349. For an excellent study of the passage in light of Plutarch’s main argument, see E.G. Simonetti, forthcoming.
Of the plant *eryngium* they say that if one goat take it in its mouth, first that goat itself and then the entire herd stands still until the herdsman comes and takes the plant out, such pungency, like a fire which spreads over everything near it and scatters itself abroad, is possessed by the emanations of its potency. Certainly the teachings of the philosopher, if they take hold of one person in private station who enjoys abstention from affairs and circumscribes himself by his bodily comforts, as by a circle drawn with geometrical compasses, do not spread out to others, but merely create calmness and quiet in that one man, then dry up and disappear. But if these teachings take possession of a ruler, a statesman, and a man of action and fill him with love of honour, through one he benefits many, as Anaxagoras did by associating with Pericles, Plato with Dion, and Pythagoras with the chief men of the Italiote Greeks.

The popular belief about the goat and the sea-holly (which recurs in *De sera num.* 558E and *Quaest. conv.* 700D and probably originates from Arist., *HA* 610b29) clearly foregrounds the natural scientific subtext in this passage, and the same is true for the image of the spreading fire and the drawing of geometrical circles (as well as Plutarch’s use of such technical terms as ἀπορροιαί and δύναμις). This type of natural scientific imagery is meant to serve a literary purpose in rendering Plutarch’s argument more palatable to the reader, pointing out, in this case, that not only the philosopher but also the political ruler and, through him, the people can in fact benefit from philosophical teachings.

As already noted in the previous chapter, natural phenomena are often subject to a moralising type of exemplification in Plutarch’s writings [see 1.2.4.]. A good example can be seen in *Phoc.* 3, 1–3, where Plutarch compares Cato the Younger’s old-fashioned virtue in times of moral decay with fruits that grow out of season: these fruits are admired but not used. In the previous paragraph (*Phoc.* 2, 6–9), the non-rectilinear motion of the sun, which is said to provide an ideal temperature for all things on earth, is reinterpreted in light of a political precept, in order to suggest that a moderate government is best. This aspect of cosmic balance and harmony is considered to be in line with how the Platonic God rules the universe — that is, by means of reason and persuasion rather than by necessity (cf. *Tim.* 48a).

13 For further discussion of this topic, see L. Van der Stockt, 2012.
Now, the sun, as mathematicians tell us, has neither the same motion as the heavens, nor one that is directly opposite and contrary, but takes a slanting course with a slight inclination, and describes a winding spiral of soft and gentle curves, thus preserving all things and giving them the best temperature. And so in the administration of a city, the course which is too straight, and opposed in all things to the popular desires, is harsh and cruel, just as, on the other hand, it is highly dangerous to tolerate or yield perforce to the mistakes of the populace. But that wise guidance and government of men which yields to them in return for their obedience and grants them what will please them, and then demands from them in payment what will advantage the state, – and men will give docile and profitable service in many ways, provided they are not treated despotsically and harshly all the time, – conduces to safety, although it is laborious and difficult and must have that mixture of austerity and reasonableness which is so hard to attain. But if the mixture be attained, that is the most concordant and musical blending of all rhythms and all harmonies; and this is the way, we are told in which God regulates the universe, not using compulsion, but making persuasion and reason introduce what must be.

A myriad of such examples could be adduced to illustrate Plutarch’s frequent reinterpretation of natural phenomena as rhetorical exempla. What matters for us here is that this technique of comparing and unifying human affairs with natural phenomena is intelligent and often renders Plutarch’s personal comments and criticism more enjoyable to read. As such, by using these images, Plutarch offers both a literary and an instructive, if not more philosophical and contemplative pleasure to his readers (as in the last case).

In Quaestiones naturales, by contrast, Plutarch’s primary concern is to provide natural explanations for problematic phenomena. Therefore, he generally avoids referring to their metaphorical implications. Never-
theless, several of these phenomena are exploited as rhetorical *exempla* elsewhere, viz. as images of fear (cf. *Q.N.* 11 ~ *De tranq. an.* 475F–476A), the lack of steadfast character (cf. *Q.N.* 19 ~ *De ad. et am.* 51D–53D, *De am. mult.* 96F–97A, *Alc.* 23, 4–5), democratic elections (cf. *Q.N.* 26, 918D ~ *Praec. ger.* reip. 801A), athletic strength (cf. *Q.N.* 32 ~ *Quaest. conv.* 724E), marital infidelity (cf. *Q.N.* 36 ~ *Coni. praec.* 144D), hostility (cf. *Q.N.* 37 ~ *De gar.* 514D), the joining of opposites (cf. *Q.N.* 41 ~ *De cap.* ex inim. 92B). Parallel passages of this sort nicely illustrate how Plutarch constantly refashions his scientific ideas in different literary contexts. The sheer amount of these parallels demonstrates that such physical themes play an important unifying role throughout the Chaeronean’s oeuvre. As we will see in what follows, they are also very relevant for Plutarch’s general writing method.

### 2. Cluster analysis in *Quaestiones naturales*

The most intriguing case in terms of parallel passages between *Quaestiones naturales* and Plutarch’s other works is *Q.N.* 19, which concerns the octopus’ change of colour. I have already partly discussed this problem in the previous chapter [see 1.2.4.], but will return to it here in light of Plutarch’s writing technique.

What is important is that several key elements relating to Plutarch’s discussion of the octopus’ metachrosis as found in *Q.N.* 19 are repeated in a number of parallel passages, where the aspect of physical aetiology is not as central. The natural phenomenon is compared with the adaptable character of flatterers in *De ad. et am.* 51D–53D and *De am. mult.* 96F–97A, and with the opportunistic politics of Alcibiades in *Alc.* 23, 4–5. There is also a parallel concerning the animal’s psychology in *De soll. an.* 978EF. Considering the topic’s frequent recurrence, we can speak of a genuine ‘cluster’ of parallel passages here, which Van der Stockt has defined (in light of his method of ‘cluster analysis’) as “a repeated and structured collection of heterogeneous materials”\(^{15}\). Depending on the number of textual parallels, Van der Stockt makes a distinction between ‘parallel passages’ (two parallels) and ‘clusters’ (three or more parallels). Such parallels and clusters are often identified by a set of recurrent quotations, anecdotes, similes, concepts etc. In the case of the octopus cluster, these are found – as schematised below – in 1) the quotations from Pindar and Theognis, 2) a more ethical *vis-à-vis* more physical orientation, and 3) the reference to specific physical concepts (viz. emanations and breath)\(^{16}\).

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15 L. Van der Stockt, 1999a, p. 580.
16 For a separate analysis of this octopus cluster, see M. Meeusen, 2012a, pp. 247–250. There are several other such clusters with parallels in our collection, but it would bring us much too far to discuss each and every one of them in detail here. I will briefly discuss the
One of the most important advantages of Van der Stockt’s method of cluster-analysis is that it, besides from being highly efficient and orderly, offers detailed insight into Plutarch’s argumentative tactics and his writing and rewriting process, with a particular interest for his use of personal notes (ὑπομνήματα)\(^\dagger\) (I will deal with the specific nature of Plutarch’s notes below [see 2.3.2.]). In the octopus cluster, then, it is not unlikely that Plutarch reuses and remodels the same material, drawing from (one or more of) his personal notes on zoological topics, and adapting this hypomnematie material to various contexts. Van der Stockt is well aware of the possibility, however, that one writing can be inspired by another, or that the parallelism in subject matter derives from mental, rather than textual, processes\(^\ddagger\). Indeed, also in the case of Q.N. 19 one cannot simply dismiss that the hypomnematie material at some point became an idée fixe in Plutarch’s mind, such that the textual intermediation of a ὑπόμνημα in each and every case must eventually remain hypothetical.

Another important aspect regarding the parallel passages between Quaestiones naturales and Plutarch’s other writings is that there are considerably few such parallels in the Vitae\(^\S\). This is not at all the case

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\(^\ddagger\) Therefore, each case should be considered individually. See L. Van der Stockt, 1999a, p. 597 and 2004, p. 335, n. 10. See also S.A. Xenophontos, 2012, p. 87 and M. Meeusen, 2012a.

\(^\S\) Cf. Q.N. 19 ~ Alc. 23, 4–5; Q.N. 11 and 19 ~ Arat. 29, 6; Q.N. 11 ~ Demetr. 38, 4 and Per. 33, 5. These parallels are also rather weak in comparison to those in the Moralia.

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<tr>
<th>Octopus cluster</th>
<th>Quotations</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Alc. 23, 4–5</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Q.N. 19, 916BF</strong></td>
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<td><strong>De soll. an. 978EF</strong></td>
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Key: X = clearly present; x = clearly present, but less strongly articulated than in Q.N. 19; Χ = clearly present, but ruled out by Plutarch.
with the *Moralia*, where we find an abundance of parallel material. The same material can be found especially in the more specialised natural scientific works (*De primo frigido*, *De facie*, *De sollertia animalium* and esp. *Quaestiones convivales*), but parallel passages are also present in Plutarch’s non-scientific works. These parallels are not always entirely identical in form or content but often involve specific textual adaptations and rearrangements to suit the new context. A detailed analysis of each of these parallel accounts cannot be achieved here. Instead, I will enumerate the most important procedures discernible in their incorporation.

First of all, a number of rather loose allusions to and weak reformulations of the same *Quaestiones naturales* material can be found throughout the *Moralia*, where the argumentation often relies on generally accepted scientific concepts and theories (e.g., the idea that salty seawater is naturally hot). The parallelism, however, is far more prominent in other cases, as can be seen, for instance, in the cluster of parallel passages concerning the production of dew by the moon (discussed in *Q.N. 24, Quaest. conv.* 659B and *De facie* 940A). In this cluster Plutarch repeats the same quotation from Alcman, where Dew is called the daughter of Zeus and Moon (43 Diehl: Διὸς θυγάτηρ Ἔρσα τρέφει καὶ Σελάνας δίας). Yet, there are also subtle differences in the arguments at hand. The most significant difference is that in *Q.N. 24*, Plutarch refers to the mechanism of attraction (δική) in explaining how dew comes to be, while in *Quaest. conv.* 659B and *De facie* 940A, he refers to the process of change (μεταβολή). This can be explained in light of the different aetiological contexts. In the latter two passages, Plutarch argues that the moon has a liquefying effect, and that the air (Ζεύς in Alcman’s line) is liquefied by the moon into dew. The context of lunar liquefaction is absent, however, in *Q.N. 24*, where Plutarch argues (regarding the problem of why hunters are least successful in following animal tracks during full moons) that the moon draws the dew, which is a weak and impotent kind of rain, up from the earth like the sun does, but being unable to lift it to a height and to raise it, drops it again. Considering the clear Stoic overtones in this cluster (as attested in the allegorical reading of Alcman’s verse and the allusion to exhalations as fuel for the moon and sun: see the commentary *ad loc.*), it is only likely that a certain compositional interference must have occurred when Plutarch wrote down these passages (did he perhaps draw from his notes on a Stoic commentary on Aleman?). The slight differences in argumentative detail can be ascribed, then, to the different argumentative contexts in which the material was incorporated.

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20 For a list of the most obvious parallels between *Quaestiones naturales* and the *Moralia*, see the index (s.v. “Plutarch”), in F.H. Sandbach, 1965, pp. 239–240 (where *Quaestiones naturales* covers pp. 133–229). Sandbach’s index records no parallels with the *Vitae* (see n. 19).
Second, when it comes to the number and detail of the explanations Plutarch provides in his natural problems, it seems that the aetiologies are far more systematic in *Quaestiones naturales* than in the parallel accounts. Indeed, one has the impression that Plutarch in this work aims to amass all of his knowledge on the natural phenomena at issue, while elsewhere he is more concerned with adapting only fractions of this material, often, indeed, in different contexts, so that an elaborate aetiology is not necessary. This is seen, for instance, in the octopus cluster, where the most exhaustive account is given in *Q.N.* 19 (see the scheme above). Only in one exceptional case does a specific argument take on greater rigor elsewhere than in *Quaestiones naturales*. This is the case in *Q.N.* 29, 919AB, where Plutarch argues that cold is a δύναμις in itself rather than a στέρησις of heat. This theory is elaborated in far greater detail in *De primo frigido* (946A–948A), a treatise in which the principle of cold is the main subject of inquiry. In *Q.N.* 29, however, the same theory is formulated in a very condensed fashion to serve as a starting-point for Plutarch’s discussion of why we marvel at hot springs but not at cold ones.

What these clusters and parallels show is that the widely accepted unity and consisteny in the *corpus Plutarcheum* is considerably strengthened by the use of specific natural scientific topics, often identical or similar to those of *Quaestiones naturales*²¹. No wonder that Flacelière regarding Plutarch’s digression on drinking water in *Aem. Paul.* 14 (discussed below) notes: “On croirait vraiment lire un paragraphe des *Causes physiques*.”²² In the following section, I will deal with the recurrent incorporation of scientific digressions in the *Vitae* more specifically and with the discursive role these digressions play in the biographical narratives at hand. Getting a clearer view of Plutarch’s technique of incorporating such scientific digressions into the *Vitae* will be valuable to further study the position of *Quaestiones naturales* in the *corpus Plutarcheum*.

### 3. Scientific digressions in the *Vitae*

Plutarch’s digressive writing method spans a wide range of topics in the *Vitae*. Most digressions in these writings deal with topics related to Greek

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²¹ For more on the unity between the *Vitae* and the *Moralia*, based on the scientific digressions in the former, see J. Boulogne, 2008, p. 748 (regarding the parallel on βουλιμία between *Quaest. conv.* 693E–695E and *Brut.* 25, 4–6; see further). Regarding the unity in the *corpus Plutarcheum* more generally, see J. Barthelmess, 1986, pp. 62–64 and the contributions in A.G. Nikolaidis, 2008.

and Roman history and culture (viz. names, places and customs). This is only a logical consequence of Plutarch’s basic intention with these writings, which is to portray the lives of illustrious Greek and Roman political figures. To this end, many cultural and historical realia require a detailed explanation for the reader to acquire an optimal understanding of the story-line and its broader context. Plutarch also incorporates more reflective digressions, in order to add a specific philosophical-theological layer – the ὑλὴ φιλοσοφίας – to his biographical discourses, pointing out, for instance, that God is capable only of doing good (Per. 39, 2–3), or that demons try to lead virtuous people astray (Dion 2, 4–7). As noted, there is often also a physical specification of the narratives by the incorporation of numerous scientific digressions. In the end, the physical world – or at least Plutarch’s Platonic view of it – is the ultimate background against which these biographies are set.

These scientific digressions testify to Plutarch’s intellectual concerns and desire to look for explanations. From a narratological perspective, however, the digressions do not always seem to have much relevance for the main story-lines, to which they often only bear indirect relevance. Barrow may well be right, therefore, that such digressions come in handy “as a means of suspending the interest of the reader” – after all, “Plutarch should not be read in a hurry.” These digressions add a specific physical dimension to the text. Van der Stockt has convincingly argued, in this regard, that “some of Plutarch’s scientific ‘digressions’ are no mere display of scholarship, but are quite functional: they explain the world in which the heroes are operating.” Indeed, Plutarch’s Vitae are often set against a specific geographical decor that plays a direct role in the development of the narrative. Many historical events are, in fact, directly related to specific natural phenomena and their causes. At some points, nature


25 L. Van der Stockt, 2013, p. 445. He also points at “Plutarch’s endeavour to explore more or less virtuous human conduct in the world such as it is according to the Platonist Plutarch” (p. 438).

26 Cf. J. Sirinelli, 2000, p. 363: “Dans les Vies il parle souvent des particularités géographiques des pays concernés. Il suffit de consulter la Vie d’Alexandre ou celle d’Antoine pour se rendre compte qu’il s’est beaucoup informé sur les régions traversées et avec beaucoup de discernement. On ne peut affirmer qu’il a une connaissance très poussée de toute la géographie de son temps, mais il semble clair que, chaque fois qu’il traite d’un sujet qui appelle des connaissances dans ce domaine, il fait le nécessaire pour se renseigner et sait où puiser ses informations.”
even conditions human action\textsuperscript{27} (solar or lunar eclipses, for instance, can engender fear in generals, thus causing military defeat)\textsuperscript{28}. Moreover, the heroes of Plutarch’s stories are, in a certain sense, presented as human products of nature, with a specific φύσις of their own. The link between a person’s character and his bodily disposition becomes concrete, for instance, in Plutarch’s reference to Lysander’s melancholy in \textit{Lys}. 2, 3. Plutarch there quotes Aristotle, who writes that ‘great natures’, like those of Socrates and Plato and Heracles, have a tendency to melancholy (τὰς μεγάλας φύσεις ἀποφαίνων μελαγχωλικάς), and that Lysander, not immediately, but when well on in years, was a prey to this affliction – this is a clear allusion to the famous chapter on melancholy in Ps.-Aristotle’s \textit{Problems} (953a10–955a40). Another likely allusion to the \textit{Problems} is found in \textit{Arat}. 29, 6 [quoted 3.1.1.], where Plutarch discusses Aratus’ cowardice and its bodily manifestations (viz. heart palpitations, change in colour and looseness of the bowels), noting that such topics are popular points of discussion in the philosophers’ schools (ἐν ταῖς σχολαῖς). By the recurrent link between ethics and physics in the \textit{Vitae}, Plutarch’s heroes can be considered the microcosmic pawns on the macrocosmic chessboard that is the world\textsuperscript{29}.

As the examples below will show, Plutarch knows very well that his natural scientific digressions might seem to contain rather redundant and heterogeneous materials in the context of the biographies of political figures. However, it turns out that these digressions, besides from serving as intellectual diversions, often also fulfil a specific literary function in the text, such as characterising the hero’s personality or illustrating an important historical event (often in the context of divine intervention).


Indeed, they are often cleverly woven into the overall narrative in such a way that they do not tip the work’s unity out of balance. If a digression tends to deviate too far from the central story-line, Plutarch breaks it off in time (see the formulations of closure below)30. Apparently, he is well aware of the fact that a complete treatment of natural scientific topics is impossible in the Vitae, and that this should be reserved for a more specialised genre of writing.

Desideri was the first to devote a separate study to the natural scientific digressions in the Vitae31, and there is also a more recent one by Boulogne32. Their overviews show that these digressions concern matters of physics, astronomy, geography, geometry, zoology, medicine, psychology and music. The aetiological structure and approach in these digressions, where Plutarch often provides several plausible explanations for a specific natural phenomenon, reminds the reader of the ‘problematic’ set-up of Quaestiones naturales [see 1.1.4.]. There is not enough space to analyse each and every one of the scientific digressions in the Vitae here – even Desideri notes that running through all the scientific passages in the Vitae may be a “cosa che probabilmente non avrebbe molto senso”33 –, but the following examples may suffice to make things more concrete.

One of the most well-known scientific digressions is probably the one on the nature and origin of naphtha in Alex. 3534. Sansone has interpreted this passage in light of Alexander’s character and physiognomy, arguing that “the volatile and flammable nature of naphtha is remarkably like the nature of Alexander as portrayed by Plutarch”35. As such, the digression is actually key to Plutarch’s ethical portrait of Alexander. I will not provide an analysis of the entire passage here. It is worth mentioning that several parallels can be traced in Quaestiones convivales (viz. the marvellous phenomena of naphtha in 681C, the use of ‘waterbeds’ in 649EF, and Harpalus’ failure to plant ivy in Babylonian soil in 648CD and 649E)36. The fact that some of these issues are treated in greater detail in

30 Eight of the approximately 40 scientific digressions collected by J. Boulogne, 2008 contain a formulation of closure, meaning that Plutarch terminates these passages explicitly (see, p. 746, with n. 36).
33 P. Desideri, 1992, pp. 73–74.
34 Cf., e.g., J.R. Hamilton, 1969, p. 94: “The former passage is a good example of Plutarch’s interest in science.”
36 According to J. Boulogne, 2008, p. 737, in this digression, Plutarch reuses pieces of
Quaestiones convivales is important, because at the end of the Alexander passage, Plutarch notes that if such digressions are kept within bounds, the impatient readers will perhaps complain about them less (Alex. 35, 16: τῶν μὲν οὖν τοιούτων παρεκβάσεων, ἂν μέτρον ἔχωσιν, ἦττον ἴσως οἵ δύσκολοι κατηγορήσουσιν). As the parallels in Quaestiones convivales show, the potential impatience on behalf of the reader does not so much involve the scientific contents of such digressions, but rather the fact that they tend to disrupt the fluency and coherence of the main story-line. Then again, Plutarch warned his reader in the introduction in Alex. 1, 2 that he is ‘not writing history but biography’ (οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίου). Plutarch’s digression on the fiery soil of Babylon, thus, turns out to be an important motive for the biographical narrative in that it, at least implicitly, illustrates Alexander’s fiery character and physiognomy.

Another example can be found in Lys. 12, where Plutarch, after having mentioned that some people thought that Lysander’s swift ending of the Peloponnesian war was the result of divine intervention (θείόν τινες ἡγήσαντο τοῦτο τὸ ἔργον), elaborates on the meteorite that fell in Aegospotami in 468–467BC. Plutarch reports that this phenomenon was considered a divine portent in those days. He does not intend to reject this idea, but he gives a more physical motivation for it in the form of five explanations, including popular opinions, the theories of Anaxagoras and Daimachus, as well as his own criticisms and comments. The aetiology is relatively elaborate and occupies an entire paragraph. Importantly, Plutarch again abruptly concludes the aetiology with the remark that a more minute discussion of this subject belongs to ‘another kind of writing’ (Lys. 12, 7: ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἑτέρῳ γένει γραφῆς διακριβωτέον). I will come back to this later.

The ending is even more abrupt in Aem. Paul. 14, where Plutarch illustrates Aemilius Paulus’ superb leadership with a digression on drinking water. The story goes that Aemilius Paulus’ troops were greatly overcome by thirst as there was no drinking water available. Aemilius Paulus saw green trees growing on the slopes of Mt. Olympus and inferred that drinking water must be present there. So he started digging at the foot of the mountain, yielding gallons of water for his soldiers to drink. As if intending to match Aemilius Paulus’ practical ingenuity in these matters, albeit at a more theoretical level, Plutarch posits two theories in opposition to each other in order to explain where this drinking water exactly came from. The first theory is that water is generated when moist vapour and air under the earth are liquefied through compression and cooling. When the

“un dossier constitué autour de l’autorité de Théophraste et qu’il expose plus longuement dans les Propos de Table, où le nom du philosophe botaniste est cité, et il suggère d’induire que la Babylone possède un sous-sol générateur de feu (πυριγόνον)”. See Theophr., HP 4, 4, 1 (and CP 2, 3, 3; 2, 7, 3).
soil is manipulated by digging, in response, the water flows more freely. The same counts, by analogy, for women’s breasts: it is only when a baby starts sucking them that they produce milk by converting the nourishment within them (this implies that the breasts are not like vessels filled with milk). Plutarch objects, however, that those who support this doctrine give the sceptical philosophers occasion to argue (οἱ δὲ ταύτα λέγοντες ἐπιχειρεῖν δεδώκασι τοῖς ἀπορητικοῖς) – again by analogy – that living creatures do not have blood until the moment they are wounded, the blood then being generated through a transformation of some vapour or flesh, which causes its liquefaction. The alternative (and preferred) theory is that there are subterranean reservoirs and streams of water at hand, which under the weight and impulse of the pressure upon them (exerted by the mass of Mt. Olympus) discharge themselves into the vacuum afforded by the vents and wells. Plutarch closes the discussion rather inelegantly with the words ταύτα μὲν περὶ τούτων (‘that takes care of that!’: Aem. Paul. 14, 11), as if to excuse himself for his somewhat schoolmasterly diligence.37

A last example is in Flam. 10, 6, where Plutarch reports that during the Isthmian games, a flock of ravens fell from the sky due to very loud cheers from the crowd. Indeed, the Greeks must have been extremely cheerful the moment that Titus Flamininus declared them to be free. In this passage, Plutarch clearly builds towards a narrative climax, yet at the same time it seems that he is trying to keep his authorial cool (this may, indeed, have specific political dimensions in view of the altered political situation in his own days). Plutarch slows down the narrative pace by the repetition of Flamininus’ proclamation – at first, the Greeks could not believe their ears. This is reinforced by the incorporation of three explanations for the natural anomaly of ravens falling from the sky:

And that which is often said of the volume and power of the human voice was then apparent to the eye. For ravens which chanced to be flying overhead fell down into the stadium. The cause of this was (1) the rupture of the air; for when the voice is borne aloft loud and strong, the air is rent asunder by it and will not support flying creatures, but lets them fall, as if they were over a vacuum, unless, indeed, (2) they

37 For further commentary on this digression, see C. Liedmeier, 1935, pp. 162–167.
are transfixed by a sort of blow, as of a weapon, and fall down dead. It is possible, too, (3) that in such cases there is a whirling motion of the air, which becomes like a waterspout at sea with a refluent flow of the surges caused by their very volume.

The same phenomenon is mentioned in *Caes.* 63, 2 among several other bad omens witnessed the night before the Ides of March. It also recurs in *Pomp.* 25, 6–7 in greater detail, in the context of the *rogatio Gabinia* in the Roman senate and the people’s impatient cry at the forum. In the latter passage Plutarch lists the same explanations and uses the same terminology as in the *Flamininus* passage, but the first solution is explicitly rejected and the third is less clearly distinguished from the second:

επὶ τούτῳ λέγεται δυσχεράναντα τὸν δῆμον τηλικοῦτον ἀνακραγεῖν ὥστε ὑπερ-πετόμενον κόρακα τῆς ἀγορᾶς τυφωθῆναι καὶ καταπεσεῖν εἰς τὸν ὄχλον. ἤδειν οὐ δοκεῖ ῥήξει τοῦ ἀέρος καὶ διασπασμῷ κενὸν πολὺ λαμβάνοντος ἐνολισθαίνειν τὰ πίπτοντα τῶν ὀρνέων, ἀλλὰ τυπτόμενα τῇ πληγῇ τῆς φωνῆς, ὅταν ἐν τῷ ἀέρι σάλον καὶ κύμα πούσις πολλὴ καὶ ἵσχυρὰ φερομένη.

At this, we are told, the people were incensed and gave forth such a shout that a raven flying over the forum was stunned by it and fell down into the throng. From this it appears (1) that such falling of birds is not due to a rupture and division of the air wherein a great vacuum is produced, but (2) that they are struck by the blow of the voice, which raises a surge and billow in the air when it is borne aloft loud and strong.

What these passages show is that Plutarch speaks of the same natural phenomenon on several occasions and in different contexts, where it always plays a specific discursive role. In the case of falling ravens it underlines the key-importance and extra-ordinary character of specific historical events. Even if the aetiology is not simply copy-pasted in these parallel accounts, specific conceptual and verbal reminiscences can still be detected, so that we may presume a certain intermediation in composition.

Notably, Plutarch had several such fixed theoretical and terminological schemes in the back of his mind that he could easily apply to different natural phenomena. An allusion, for instance, to the ὑπερβολὴ τῆς φωνῆς καὶ μέγεθος at the beginning of the *Flamininus* passage (and more precisely the physical impact of sounds on bodies) is found in *Quaest. conv.* 721EF, where Plutarch – in explaining a different problem, viz. why sounds carry better at night than during the daytime – defines sound as an impact on a sound-conducting body (ἡ δὲ φωνὴ πληγὴ σώματος)38. Similarly, the concept

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38 Cf. also *De fortuna* 98BC, *De genio Socr.* 588E, Pl., *Tim.* 67b and Arist., *DA* 420b29.
of impact (πληγή), in combination with that of surge (σάλον), is once again introduced, for instance, in the first causa in Q.N. 12, 914F, where Plutarch – in examining how sprinkling oil on the surface of the sea clears and calms the waters – gives Aristotle’s explanation, according to which the wind, by its slipping off the smoothness so caused by the oil, makes no impact and raises no surge (Πότερον, ώς Ἀριστοτέλης φησί, τὸ πνεύμα τῆς λειότητος ἀπολισθαῖνον οὐ ποιεῖ πληγήν οὐδὲ σάλον). From parallels like these, we learn that Plutarch’s natural problems, as known from Quaestiones naturales, do not hold an isolated position in the corpus Plutarcheum but actually stand in close dialogue with Plutarch’s other works, where physical aetiology is concerned. Remarkably enough, though, Plutarch never refers to Quaestiones naturales in his other works in a direct way, which may suggest that the collection does not hold a very central position. Even still, as the following section will show, several passages may qualify as indirect references.

4. Indirect references to Quaestiones naturales

Plutarch never directly refers to Quaestiones naturales throughout his writings, as he famously does to Quaestiones Romanae in Cam. 19, 8 (ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἑτέρῳ γένει γραφῆς διακριβωτέον) and in Rom. 15, 7 (Περὶ δὲ τοῖς Αἰτίοις) [see 2.4.1.]. In the first passage, Plutarch deals with the dies Alliensis, a topic treated in Quaest. Rom. 25, 269F, while in the second passage, he explains three Roman customs that originated from the abduction of the Sabine women, viz. the exclamation of Talassio, the groom carrying the bride over the doorstep, and parting her hair with the head of a spear. These topics are treated in Quaest. Rom. 31, 271F–272B, 29, 271D and 87, 285BC, respectively. Clearly, a precise reference to one or more specific problem chapters in Quaestiones Romanae was not necessary and probably not possible either, considering the lack of any systematic organisation in the collection.

Even if there are no such direct references to Quaestiones naturales, several passages may still qualify as indirect references. It is not unreasonable to assume, for instance, that the phrase ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἑτέρῳ γένει γραφῆς διακριβωτέον in Lys. 12, 7 (see above) indirectly refers to Quaestiones naturales, or at least to this ‘kind of writing’ – that is, to the genre of natural problem literature. As we saw, with this phrase Plutarch admits that the present discussion (of the meteorite that fell in Aegospotami) may seem somewhat out of context in the biographical narrative at hand. It is unclear, however, whether he is implying that this matter should (ιτέον) either literally or figuratively be treated elsewhere, making it unclear

39 See F.H. Sandbach, 1965, p. 133: “Quaestiones Naturales, however, are never cited by him”.
whether the reference is to an existing work or not. However, seeing as this reference is not to one specific text but to an entire γένος γραφῆς, this does not really seem to matter anyway. My point is that this γένος γραφῆς would, indeed, comprise the basic characteristics of the genre of natural problems as known from Quaestiones naturales (that is, a formal disposition and enumeration of several plausible explanations for a specific natural problem, where the traditional doxography is critically evaluated). If one considers, moreover, that the problem of the meteorite should be examined minutely (διακριβωτέον) elsewhere, it is not unlikely that the reference is in fact to Quaestiones naturales, where Plutarch’s aim is to collect his knowledge on several natural problems in order to provide an aetiology that is as exhaustive as possible in each case [see 2.1.2.], but this remains uncertain. The specific problem of the meteorite in Lys. 12 cannot be retraced in our collection, but what is probably more important is that Quaestiones naturales would certainly have provided the right place for treating this problem. Due to its generality, though, the reference to ‘another kind of writing’ does not guarantee with absolute certainty that Plutarch is referring to Quaestiones naturales. It at least points out that the γένος γραφῆς of Quaestiones naturales is worth referring to as a distinct genre of natural scientific writing.

Other indirect references to Quaestiones naturales may be found elsewhere, for instance, in De Is. et Os. 352F, in the context of, what seems to be, a Quaestio barbarica about Egyptian priests. The problem can be reconstructed as follows: ‘Why do Egyptian priests remove their hair, and why do they wear linen garments?’ Plutarch explains that flax, as opposed to wool, is pure, and he also mentions that it is least apt to breed lice. At the end of this passage, Plutarch refers to his treatment of the subject of lice in ‘another work’ (περὶ ὧν ἕτερος λόγος). There is a clear parallel in Quaest. conv. 642BC, where Plutarch deals with the problem of why sheep bitten by wolves tend to have sweeter flesh but wool that breeds lice. Clearly, this topic could just as easily have been dealt with in Quaestiones naturales. The same is true for Brut. 25, 6, where Plutarch incorporates a digression on βουλιμία, a distemper (caused by fatigue and cold) from which Brutus suffered when he was near the city of Epidamus. At the end of this digression Plutarch notes that the issue ‘is discussed at greater length elsewhere’ (ὑπὲρ ὧν ἐν ἑτέροις μᾶλλον ἠπόρηται). The reference is to Quaest. conv. 693E–695E, but given Plutarch’s reference to Aristotle there (cf. Ps.-Arist., Probl. 887b38–888a23) and the subsequent criticism of the Stagirite’s account by the symposiasts, one can imagine that the


reference could just as well have been to our collection – or at least, again, to this ‘kind of writing’.

Importantly, regarding the latter parallel and in light of the ‘cross-fertilisation’ between the *Vitae* and *Quaestiones convivales* more generally, Pelling is right that “we can rarely be sure that this ‘Table Talk’ material in the *Lives* is really informed by researches done ‘for’ the *Table Talk*, rather than drawn from material Plutarch had known for years”\(^\text{42}\). The issue is, indeed, intriguing, but as the problem about the Egyptian priests demonstrates it is not only relevant in light of the ‘cross-fertilisation’ between *Quaestiones convivales* and the *Vitae* but also the *Moralia*. One may wonder whether the whole of *Quaestiones naturales* (and Plutarch’s other collection of *quaestiones* just as well) would perhaps count as “researches done ‘for’ the *Quaestiones convivales*”, or if it is part of the “material Plutarch had known for years” (which I take to refer to his personal notes, his υπομνήματα). These two options are not necessarily incommensurable, if we may assume that the collection of *Quaestiones naturales* is itself a set of υπομνήματα drafted for the composition of *Quaestiones convivales*. The belief that *Quaestiones naturales* (and Plutarch’s other collections of *quaestiones* just as well) were, indeed, composed as rough drafts was commonly accepted by traditional scholarship, but in what follows I will try to demonstrate that this assumption is untenable by showing that there is still an alternative explanation for the mutual correspondences with *Quaestiones convivales*.

In order to shed more light on the close relationship between the natural problems discussed in *Quaestiones naturales* and in *Quaestiones convivales*, then, the following section will provide a detailed comparison of the two works. On the basis of this comparison I will argue that the composition of these works must have been closely related. This, in turn, will provide further information for our study of the actual position of *Quaestiones naturales* in the corpus Plutarcheum.

### 2.2. A comparative study of *Quaestiones naturales* and *Quaestiones convivales*

Scholars have often argued, and rightly so, that the composition of the natural problems collected in *Quaestiones naturales* and in *Quaestiones convivales* must have been closely interrelated\(^\text{43}\). As I will try to demon-

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\(^{43}\) Cf. F. Klotz and K. Oikonomopoulou, 2011, p. 20. This is true perhaps also from a chronological perspective, see F.H. Sandbach, 1965, p. 138 [see the prologue]. Pace I. Gallo, 1998, p. 3527: “il confronto [sc. of *Quaestiones naturales*] con le ‘quaestiones convivales’, dove pure sono trattati problemi di vario genere, è solo apparente, perché diversa è la forma e l’elaborazione letteraria, quasi del tutto assente in questo […]”
strate here, both of these works are, indeed, tightly interwoven in several regards, even if there are also important divergences between the two. Regarding the style, organisation and content of the natural problems in *Quaestiones naturales* compared to those in *Quaestiones convivales*, Ziegler observes that:

“Die Problemen [sc. in *Quaestiones naturales*] sind ganz in der Art derer, die in den Symposiaka zwischen P. und seinen Tischgenossen diskutiert werden, hier aber nicht literarisch-dialogisch ausgestaltet, sondern in der einfachen Kollektaneenform zusammengestellt”

The three categories that Ziegler implicitly distinguishes in this short comparison are related to aspects of *elocutio* (“literarisch-dialogisch ausgestaltet”), *dispositio* (“in der einfachen Kollektaneenform zusammengestellt”), and *inventio* (“[die] Art [der Problemen]”). These are the three categories that I will also use in providing a more detailed comparison in the sections below.

As noted, some scholars have argued that we are dealing in *Quaestiones naturales* (and in Plutarch’s other sets of *quaestiones*) with collections of personal notes, which Plutarch produced as the inferior textual substratum for composing his other writings (c.q. *Quaestiones convivales*). I will try to demonstrate that such a hypothesis not only tends to downplay the zetetic autonomy of Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones*, but also neglects the fact that these collections do not necessarily have the same didactic purpose as *Quaestiones convivales*. My first objection will be discussed further on in this chapter [see 2.3.3.], the second, in the following [see 3.1.4.]. Let us first consider where the ὑπομνήματα hypothesis precisely originates, so that the subsequent elaboration of my alternative theory, vindicating the independent status of *Quaestiones naturales*, gains in credibility.

1. The level of *elocutio*

From its early beginnings on, the symposium aimed at promoting social, political and cultural unity and interaction between (male) members of elite communities. Its main goal was to engender and strengthen the coherence of these communities, by means of both serious and more frivolous

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44 K. Ziegler, 1951, col. 857.
45 I borrow these concepts (*elocutio*, *dispositio*, *inventio*) from the classical hermeneutical scheme set out by W. Babilas, 1961 [see the prologue, n. 82]. These categories are often closely interrelated to each other, so that they will not be analysed in strict separation from each other. Furthermore, some topics that will be dealt with here have already been examined earlier or will be later in further detail.
activities, ranging from discussing politics to deliberating over the wine, enjoying artistic performances, jointly singing skolia, solving riddles, etc. As a late representative of the literary genre of the symposium (the συμποσικῶν γένος, cf. Quaest. conv. 614A), Plutarch’s Quaestiones convivales serves as a lively source for much of our knowledge about how such symposia were organised in elite milieus in the early Greco-Roman Empire and what was their binding function, in both social and intellectual terms.

With the Symposia of Xenophon and Plato the age-old sympotic institution poached on the preserves of the literary-philosophical tradition. Plutarch is proud to signal that he modelled his own Quaestiones convivales after these and related philosophical texts (cf. Quaest. conv. 612DE, 686D: see n. 80). This, of course, plays a determining role for the eventual outlook of Plutarch’s own sympotic discussions and for their philosophical purpose. At the same time, the influence of Alexandrian scholarship is undeniable in Plutarch’s Quaestiones convivales. There is proof that from the Hellenistic period on, the genre of the symposium was specifically associated with aetiological research. Some fragments that remain from Callimachus’ Αἴτια are presumably set against a sympotic background46. The same scholarly approach lies at the basis of many, if not most, of the sympotic discussions recorded in Quaestiones convivales. The work as a whole can, thus, be seen as the product of a literary experiment, in which the Chaeronean tries to crossbreed the genre of problems with that of the dramatised, philosophical symposium. Therefore, Plutarch’s ambition with this work was not only of a scholarly but also, and more primarily, of a philosophical kind.

The reader finds in Quaestiones convivales a fully-fledged work of literature, where Plutarch describes the lively discussions held at the table in his company. It is generally accepted that Plutarch in this work intended to elevate the somewhat profane genre of problems to a higher literary level by fusing it with that of the symposium (or, vice versa, to implant the problem format on the symposium genre). The lively mise-en-scène of the discussions aims to intensify the sense of dramatic and literary realism in the work. From a literary perspective, it is clear that Plutarch evokes a highly rhetorical discourse that echoes (and probably idealises [see 2.3.1.]) the real-life table discussions he held with his fellow symposiasts. The characters that Plutarch puts on stage – thus including his own literary alter ego – are mostly well-read and eloquent πεπαιδευμένοι, eager to deliver

46 See frs. 43, 12–17 and 178 with A. Harder, 2012, p. 35 (in vol. 1) and pp. 301–302 and 955 (in vol. 2). See also A. Cameron, 1995, pp. 71–103. The pinnacle of this scholarly-sympotic tradition is reached in Athenaeus’ Deipnosophistae.
on the spot deliberations on puzzling topics and capable of reproducing countless quotations by heart (from the poets, historians, philosophers etc.).

As we saw in the previous chapter, the general style of *Quaestiones naturales*, by contrast, remains at a rather sub-literary level [1.2.3.]. But even if the questions and answers are not dramatised so as to represent lively discussions, they still share the same learned and scholarly appeal of *Quaestiones convivales*47. Fuhrmann is exaggerating, then, when he writes:

“Il faut signaler ici [sc. regarding *Quaestiones convivales*], en outre, l’extraordinaire foisonnement des citations, des récits, fables, apotegmes, proverbes et images, qui fournissaient à eux seuls à Plutarque un moyen facile de dépasser à coup sûr la forme rudimentaire des Questions Naturelles, Romaines, Grecques, et la froideur stéréotypée des recueils de cette espèce.”48

In fact, Plutarch does incorporate several citations, myths, stories, proverbs, and images in *Quaestiones naturales*, even if they appear in a more condensed form and are less numerous49. What is also important is the fact that these elements eventually serve the same discursive purpose as those recorded in *Quaestiones convivales*. They primarily contribute to a proper development of the problems and arguments themselves, so that their use in literary embellishment is only of secondary importance [see 1.2.3.].

To come back to Fuhrmann’s account, and more precisely to what he adds directly after the passage just quoted, he is absolutely right that the

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47 Moreover, as scholars have effectively shown, at least a certain degree of elaboration went into the composition of *Quaestiones naturales* (see further). See G.W.M. Harrison, 2000b, esp. pp. 247–249 and L. Senzasono, 2006, p. 10: “è inesatto parlare di “forma rudimentale”.”


49 I have already dealt with the presence of literary images in *Quaestiones naturales* [see 1.2.3.], and I will deal with the incorporation of myths and citations from both poets and prose authors later [see 4.1.2.2.–3. and 4.2.1.1. respectively]. There are also two proverbs (viz. in *Q.N.* 16, 915E and 21, 917B). In *Q.N.* 10, 914D, Plutarch refers to a story about the people of Halieis, who received an oracle ordering them to dip Dionysus in the sea. Regarding the style of Plutarch’s “books of problēmata” on antiquarian and scientific subjects, and the more technical philosophical treatises”, see D.A. Russell, 1973, p. 34, who correctly observes that “[i]n all these, there is less scope for brilliant play of exempla or quotations: [but] the richness and the metaphorical style remain pervasive”. Russell concludes that “Plutarch […] has l’âme de la naïvité; but in style, he has a sophistication and cunning which make interpretation a continuously exacting task”. On Plutarch’s method of citing in *Quaestiones convivales*, see J. König, 2010, esp. pp. 339–345 – we will later see that a similar method is applied in *Quaestiones naturales* [see 4.2.1.1.].
level of dramatic liveliness is not the same for each and every sympotic discussion in *Quaestiones convivales* (but that this is no reason to doubt the unity of the work altogether)\(^{50}\). It is not unimaginable, in this regard, that if *Quaestiones convivales* were stripped from its dramatic context, it would have the same ‘matter-of-fact’ style as *Quaestiones naturales*. Yet, it is not, therefore, a given fact that *Quaestiones naturales* was still awaiting a final veneer of literary polish, viz. by pouring it into the literary mould of the symposium\(^{51}\). In any case, the scientific parts are obviously not incorporated in an artless fashion in *Quaestiones convivales*, as if they are simply *patched* on the sympotic framework\(^{52}\). Therefore, it would be incorrect to speak of a genuine caesura between the more dramatic and the more aetiological types of discourse in *Quaestiones convivales*.

A nice way to illustrate this is by comparing the final explanation provided in *Q.N.* 3, 912EF with its parallel in *Quaest. conv.* 685DE: both passages concern the aphrodisiac properties of salt. In *Q.N.* 3, Plutarch examines why herdsmen put salt down for their cattle. He provides three explanations, arguing successively 1) that salt produces a bulk of food and fattens the cattle, 2) that it makes the cattle healthy and reduces their bulk, and 3) that it has generative and aphrodisiac properties. The formulation of the last *causa* is as clear as it is concise:

\[σκόπει δὲ, μὴ καὶ γονιμώτερα καὶ προθυμότερα πρὸς τὰς συνουσίας· καὶ γὰρ αἱ κύνες κύουσι ταχέως τάριχος ἐπεσθίουσαι, καὶ τὰ ἁληγὰ τῶν πλοίων πλείους τρέφει μῦς διὰ τὸ πολλάκις συμπλέκεσθαι.\]

Consider, however, whether animals do not become more fertile and readier towards coition. Certainly, bitches conceive quickly when they eat salted meat after mating, and ships transporting salt harbour a larger number of mice, because they frequently copulate.

In *Quaest. conv.* 685DF, the same argument recurs at greater length, where it is attributed to Philinus, but the context is different. The problem at hand is why Homer calls salt divine (cf. *Il.* 9, 214: *πάσσε δ’ ἁλὸς θείοιο*). The argument again closes off the discussion. Several new elements are added by Philinus, but the basic idea remains the same. Most notably, the account about bitches and mice recurs, albeit in a less abridged form.

\(^{50}\) F. Fuhrmann, 1972, p. xix.


\(^{52}\) Cf. the so-called Στρωματεῖς (*Patchwork*), a doxographical miscellany attributed to Plutarch by Eus., *PE* 1, 7, 16 (= fr. 179 Sandbach; Lamprias catalogue nr. 62). Cf. also, e.g., Gell., *NA Praef.* 7. For the athelesis of this “puerile compilation”, see F.H. Sandbach, 1969, pp. 324–327.
Philinus specifies regarding the popular belief that female mice become pregnant simply by licking salt that it is more likely that the saltiness serves as a kind of aphrodisiac (this is, indeed, closer to what Plutarch writes in Q.N. 3, 912EF).

When I (sc. Plutarch) stopped speaking, Philinus took up the thread: “Don’t you think that generation is divine, since the beginning of anything is always a god?” I said yes, and he went on: “Well, people hold that salt contributes not a little to generation, even as you yourself have said in talking about the Egyptians. Dog-fanciers, at any rate, whenever their dogs are sluggish towards copulation stimulate and intensify the seminal power dormant in the animals by feeding them salty meat and other briny food. Ships carrying salt breed an infinite number of mice, because, according to some authorities, the females conceive without coition by licking the salt. But it is more likely that the saltiness imparts a sting to the sexual members and serves to stimulate copulation. For this reason, perhaps, womanly beauty is called ‘salty’ and ‘piquant’ when it is not passive nor unyielding, but has charm and provocativeness. I imagine that the poets called Aphrodite “born out of the brine” and have spread the myth of her origin in the sea by way of alluding to the generative property of salt. For they also represent Poseidon himself and the sea gods in general as fertile and prolific. Even among the animals you cannot find one species of land or air that is so proliferous as are all the creatures of the sea. This is the point of Empedocles’s line: Leading the mute tribe of fruitful fish (DK31B74).”
If we compare the two accounts, we see that a great deal of dramatic and rhetorical detail goes into the scientific argument in *Quaest. conv.* 685EF. Indeed, Plutarch does not incorporate any poetical quotations in *Q.N.* 3, 912EF. However, the poetical material from *Quaest. conv.* 685EF has the same basic purpose as it would have in *Quaestiones naturales*. It is not merely incorporated to embellish the discourse, but to serve as an illustration of the main argument itself (viz. that salt has a generative, and therefore divine, property). The divine character of salt is central to the debate in *Quaest. conv.* 684E–685F as a whole, but this really comes to a climax in Philinus’ final explanation, where the divine principle of generation is at issue (‘τὸ δὲ γόνιμον οὐ δοκεῖ σοι ἐφή ‘θεῖον εἶναι, εἰπερ ἄρχη θεός πάντων;’). Presumably, Philinus’ argument is last in the aetiology, so as to provide some kind of theological closure to the physical aetiology. This aspect of theological closure is strengthened by the incorporation of mythological material (about Aphrodite, Poseidon and other sea gods) at the very end of the argument (μῦθον ἐπ’ αὐτῇ πεπλασμένον ἐξενεγκεῖν). In addition to the allegorical value of these myths – understood as riddled allusions to the generative property of salt (εἰς τὸ τῶν ἁλῶν γόνιμον αἰνιττομένου) –, the passage seems to suggest that there is a higher dimension of philosophical truth that lies beyond the purely physical realm.

By contrast, in *Q.N.* 3, 912EF, Plutarch makes no allusion to the divine character of salt, but focuses exclusively on the αἰτίαι φυσικαί. The introductory σκόπει δέ does, however, draw specific attention to this explanation. Perhaps, Philinus’ more elaborate account in *Quaest. conv.* 685EF may explain why this is the case, as it draws a link with divine generation. The absence of mythological references here in *Q.N.* 3 does not imply, moreover, that Plutarch refrains from incorporating such material altogether in *Quaestiones naturales*, let alone that these myths do not provide a similar feature of closure to the physical aetiolgies. In fact, these accounts are often placed at the very end of the aetiology in both *Quaestiones naturales* and *Quaestiones convivales* (as we will see later on [see 4.1.2.]). This is not only relevant for the issue of *elocutio* but also of *dispositio*.

2. The level of dispositio

The most basic ordering principle in *Quaestiones convivales* is the well-known organisation of the content into nine Books, each containing ten problem chapters each, with the deliberate exception of the last Book, which contains fifteen (see n. 118). With this considered limitation of
the content matter, Plutarch makes it absolutely clear that the work was not intended as an indefinite and boundless literary ἄπειρον. No such restrictions, though, are made for Plutarch’s other collections of quaestiones, which highlights the open-ended character of the research projects at issue therein.

Regarding the macrostructural arrangement of Plutarch’s collections of quaestiones in general and of Quaestiones convivales more specifically, I have argued earlier that the often chaotic and unpredictable surface of these texts can be explained from the perspective of variatio (as a basic feature of ancient miscellaneous literature more generally), while the at times close interconnection of the problem chapters and the recurrent themes and theories therein are the result of the principle of concatenatio [see 1.1.5.]. Indeed, the grouping together of different problems during one sympotic event is a relatively common feature in Quaestiones convivales, and the same structuring principle clearly recurs in Plutarch’s other collections of quaestiones, especially in Quaestiones naturales (see the introduction to the commentary for a schematic overview). As to the internal arrangement of the problem chapters themselves, moreover, we see that the symposiasts in Quaestiones convivales put forth a variety of arguments and explanations to solve the problems, while the debate as a whole is guided by the principle of increasing plausibility (τὸ πιθανόν).

Each symposiast personifies a specific position in the debate, leading to a combination of contending arguments. This organisation of the explanations is reminiscent of the development of the aetiologies in Quaestiones naturales and in Plutarch’s other collections of quaestiones just as well.

In order to illustrate this, let us again turn to Quaest. conv. 684E–685F: two interconnected problems are treated there during one and the

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55 According to J. Opsomer, 1994a, p. 12, the collection of ten Quaestiones Platonicae may have been modelled on the same decimal system as found in Quaestiones convivales. Cf. also S.-T. Teodorsson, 1989, p. 38.

56 This has led K. Oikonomopoulou, 2013a, p. 152 to conclude that quaestiones literature is, in fact, an integral part of the history and legacy of ancient encyclopaedic writing: “The quaestiones […] are not collections of Plutarch’s notes, but self-consciously fashion themselves as texts-in-progress for reasons in fact intrinsic to the kind of encyclopaedic function they envisage for themselves.” She argues that there is “an underlying desire for encyclopaedic completeness, whose fulfillment can only be guaranteed through the continuation of research, perhaps ad infinitum” (p. 150). See also esp. pp. 152–153 for Oikonomopoulou’s nuancing of the concept of ‘encyclopaedism’ in the context of quaestiones literature.

same sympotic event, viz. what is meant with the proverbial salt and bean friends and, connected with it, why Homer calls salt divine. Several of the explanations provided throughout the discussion recur in Quaestiones naturales, albeit in different forms and in different places. Florus is the συμποσίαρχος: he organises the dinner and also leads the accompanying discussion. He proposes the first problem and his interference and guidance recurs throughout the discussion as a structuring feature. The only answer to the first problem is brought up by the scholar Apollonius, who provides the obvious explanation (ἐκ προχείρου διέλυσεν) that the proverb – of salt and bean friends – refers to friends who are on very close terms, because they are prepared to have meals together. The symposiasts then raise the second problem (διηποροῦμεν), which is closely connected to the preceding one via the topic of salt, by asking, more precisely, why it is considered divine. After an intermediate account which attests to the divine character of salt in the literature (viz. in Homer and Plato), and on the remarkable abstention of Egyptian priests from salt, Florus urges his companions to leave the Egyptians out of the question and find a properly Greek explanation. The Egyptians do, indeed, complicate the problem (ἐπέτεινε δὲ τὴν ἀπορίαν), since if salt is divine, why then do Egyptian priests abstain from it on religious grounds? This kind of complication may not be appropriate in light of sympotic decorum, which demands that topics of discussion not become too complex. Plutarch (by means of his own character in the discussion) objects, however, that the Egyptians are not in conflict with the Greeks on this point (οὐδὲ τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους μάχεσθαι τοῖς Ἕλλησιν). He explains that Egyptian priests abstain from salt either for reasons of purity (because it has aphrodisiac properties owing to its heat – a point Philinus will elaborate upon later), or because it is delicious as a seasoning (making needful food enjoyable – this point is introduced with εἰκὸς δὲ καὶ). Florus then asks whether this is the reason why salt is considered divine. Plutarch affirms this and explains that salt is a basic need like water, daylight, the seasons and the earth (which is even generally considered to be a goddess) and that it is very useful for adapting food to our body and appetite (this point is paralleled in the first causa in Q.N. 3, 912DE). He also draws specific attention (σκόπει μὴ) to the fact that salt preserves bodies from decay (much like the soul preserves life in our body), as does the fire of lightning (these theories can be found also in Q.N. 1, 911D, 10, 914DE, 40 and Quaest. conv. 665C).

58 Cf. Quaest. conv. 684E (Ἐζήτει Φλῶρος, ἐστιωμένων ἡμῶν παρ’ αὐτῷ), 684F–685A (Φλῶρος μὲν οὖν ἐὰν ἔκλειεν τοὺς Ἀἰγυπτίους, Ἐλληνιστὶ δ’ αὐτοῖς εἰπέν τι πρὸς τὸ ὑποκείμενον), 685AB (‘Ἄρ’ ὁν’ ὁ Φλῶρος ἔφη ‘διὰ τοῦτο θείον εἰρήσθαι τὸν ἢλα φώμεν;’).

59 For a separate study of Egyptian accounts in Quaestiones convivales, see M. Meeusen, forthcoming d.

60 The imperative σκόπει μὴ may suggest that we are dealing here with Plutarch’s
Philinus picks up the thread (ὑπολαβών) and adds a final point in agreement with Plutarch’s previous position, by arguing that it seems likely (δοκεῖ) that generation is divine and that salt has a generative property (see above).

What this example nicely illustrates, then, is how two problems spontaneously cluster together in one and the same sympotic context. The principle of concatenatio is expressed by the prefix in διηποροῦμεν, which is a stronger form of ἀπορέω and implies a notion of continuity, as it connects the second to the first problem.61 The principle of probability, which functions as the main ordering principle in the development of the discussion, is expressed by the use of several concepts (such as δοκεῖ, εἰκός, ἵσως, οἴμαι etc.). Plutarch also recycles the same and similar material that he incorporates in Quaestiones naturales, albeit in a re-ordered fashion and in a new context. By the fact that these theories transgress the inter-textual boundaries of both collections, they testify to the adaptable and versatile nature of such scientific knowledge, as being applicable to very different problem contexts. This, in turn, is also relevant for the inventio of the scientific material in Plutarch’s natural problems.

3. The level of inventio
The practice of solving natural problems allows for the efficient reuse, reordering and reinventing of numerous more or less fixed aetiological schemes in a multitude of always new problem contexts. When compared to the natural problems discussed in Quaestiones convivales, those collected in Quaestiones naturales would also make suitable topics for discussion during symposia. Even though the connection with a sympotic framework remains implicit at all times, most of the questions that Plutarch raises therein can be generally related to the thematic category of sympotic appetite (as is especially the case with the problems on wine)62 and hence to more general sympotic themes. Oikonomopoulou makes the following conclusion in this regard:

61 Cf. LSJ, s.v. διηπορέω ii, 1 (“go through all the ἀπορίαι”) and 2 (“commonly only a stronger form of ἀπορέω, raise an ἀπορία, start a difficulty”).
62 Cf. Q.N. 10, 27, 30–31 ~ Quaest. conv. 1, 6–7; 3, 3, 5, 7–9; 5, 3–4; 6, 7; 7, 3, 9–10. See also Book three of Ps.-Aristotle’s Problems: ὅσα περὶ οἶνοποσίαν καὶ μέθην.
“Inspired by the physical reality of consumption at the symposium, they [i.e. the problems collected in *Quaestiones naturales*] prompted the exploration of topics such as the origin, nutritional benefits, and cultural value of sympotic staples such as wine, bread, water, fish, meat and vegetables (which could then ramify into the investigation of broader natural phenomena). They were also the result of curiosity about the material dimension of objects used at the symposium, or seen in religious locations such as Delphi: vessels, musical instruments, statues or sculptures.”63

The relation with sympotic reality is, of course, much more palpable in the problems collected in *Quaestiones convivales*, where the discussions often directly arise from the circumstantial setting of the symposium (e.g., recent festivals, served meals or beverages, the place of the guests at the table, proper table talk itself etc.). As such, the wide variety of themes and subjects in this work is directly related to the miscellaneous organisation of the symposium itself64 [see 1.1.5.].

Natural problems prove to be a popular topic of conversation in Plutarch’s intellectual milieu. In fact, some of Plutarch’s fellow sympo- siasts were well acquainted with the Ps.-Aristotelian Problems. In *Quaest. conv.* 734CD, most notably, Plutarch writes that a copy of the work was brought to Thermopylae, where Florus discussed it with his friends [quoted 3.2.1.]. The total amount of chapters in *Quaestiones convivales* that deal with natural scientific topics after the manner of *Quaestiones naturales*


64 Notably, in *Quaest. conv.* 629D, Plutarch makes a basic distinction between two types of problems: viz. συμποτικά and συμποσιακά. The category of συμποτικά covers problems concerning the symposium, whereas συμποσιακά are problems generally treated at the symposium. The first category is a subcategory of the latter, because it consists of meta-symposiac debates about the proper course and pragmatics of a symposium, which were also discussed at the symposium, such as whether philosophy is a fitting topic for conversation at a drinking party (*Quaest. conv.* 612E), or whether the host should arrange the placing of his guests or leave it to the guests themselves (*Quaest. conv.* 615C). Plutarch notes that both categories can be discussed at the symposium and can, therefore, be considered συμποσιακά (*Quaest. conv.* 629D). This probably explains the wording in the title of the collection (Συμποσιακῶν βιβλία Θ). H. Bolkestein, 1946, p. 7 has shown, however, that Plutarch is not always very conscientious in following the distinction between συμποτικά and συμποσιακά (cf., e.g., *Quaest. conv.* 645C, 660D vs. 686E, 717A, 736C). He adds that the distinction may be of Stoic origin, because these philosophers were very fond of grammatical issues and specifically of making subtle terminological distinctions. The Stoic Persaeus of Citium may have been the first to draw this distinction in his Συμποτικά διάλογοι/Συμποσιακά ὑπομνήματα (SVF 1, pp. 100–101, frs. 451–453). See also F. Fuhrmann, 1972, p. xv, with n. 3 and J. König, 2007, p. 61.
covers approximately one third of the entire work\textsuperscript{65}: the reader comes across problems that are related to ancient medicine\textsuperscript{66}, human physiology\textsuperscript{67} (including sensations and affections)\textsuperscript{68}, zoology\textsuperscript{69}, botany\textsuperscript{70}, meteorology\textsuperscript{71} etc.\textsuperscript{72} By the fact that these natural problems are not concerned with highly complex issues in the field of natural philosophy, but, rather, deal with very concrete, ‘everyday’ phenomena\textsuperscript{73}, they bear a marked similarity in manner and style to the Ps.-Aristotelian Problems. The solutions that are provided have no direct practical use, but only serve the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity, which in itself, as we will see later on, has specific philosophical relevance for Plutarch\textsuperscript{74} [see 4.1.1.].

2.3. Hypomnematic text genetics of Quaestiones naturales and Quaestiones convivales

From our previous comparison of the natural problems treated in Quaestiones naturales and Quaestiones convivales, we can safely conclude that there must be some text genetic tie between both collections, which deserves further study here. A study of the genesis of Quaestiones convivales in relation to that of Quaestiones naturales should clarify their relative compositional lineage. An initial problem that should be settled in this regard is the vexata quaestio of the historicity in the sympotic discussions recorded there, a controversial issue that still causes debate today\textsuperscript{75}.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Cf., e.g., Q.N. 26 ~ Quaest. conv. 6; 8; 9.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Cf., e.g., Q.N. 6; 36 ~ Quaest. conv. 2; 3; 6; 4; 1; 10; 6; 8; 7; 1; 8; 10; 9; 11.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Cf., e.g., Q.N. 8; 9; 11; 20; 22; 29 ~ Quaest. conv. 1; 8; 3; 3–4; 8; 5; 7; 6; 1–3.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Cf., e.g., Q.N. 3; 17–22; 26; 28; 35–38 ~ Quaest. conv. 2; 3; 7–9; 4; 4; 8; 8.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Cf., e.g., Q.N. 1; 2; 4–6; 14–16; 30–32; 41 ~ Quaest. conv. 2; 6; 3; 1–2; 4; 2; 10; 5; 3; 8, 9; 6; 10; 7; 2; 8; 4.
\item \textsuperscript{71} Cf., e.g., Q.N. 2; 4; 7; 13; 18; 23–25; 34; 40 ~ Quaest. conv. 3; 10; 4; 2.
\item \textsuperscript{72} For a similar categorisation, see R. Lopes, 2009, p. 419.
\item \textsuperscript{73} See K. Oikonomopoulou, 2013a, p. 146: “the QN’s investigations do not emanate from a scientist’s ivory tower, but are anchored in the economic and cultural parameters of practical life: agriculture, animal husbandry, hunting, fishing, sea-faring, swimming, feasting and drinking.”
\item \textsuperscript{75} For recent debate about the historicity of Quaestiones convivales, see esp. F. Titchener, 2009 (also 2011), G. Roskam, 2010, pp. 46–47 (with nn. 8 and 9 for further reading) and the introduction in F. Klotz and K. Oikonomopoulou, 2011, pp. 3–7.
\end{itemize}
1. Historicity and fiction in *Quaestiones convivales*

In the preface to the first Book of *Quaestiones convivales*, Plutarch addresses the dedicatee, Sossius Senecio, by declaring that the first three volumes that he sends to him present a set of conversations held at table in Rome and Greece. In the preface to the second Book, he notes that he simply jotted down the conversations as each came to his mind. On the basis of these accounts, scholars have accepted that we are dealing with genuine recollections in this work, and that the symposiastic conversations that Plutarch records there are historical. The discussions described in *Quaestiones convivales* would, thus, represent a development of personal notes that Plutarch took after the conversations in which he himself either actively or passively participated. The argument is further substantiated by the fact that many of the dinners recorded in *Quaestiones convivales* may very well have taken place at certain locations and during specific festive events, as they are often described in minute detail. The symposiasts that are put on stage are mostly close relatives, friends, students and acquaintances of Plutarch, rather than entirely fictitious characters. The historicity of these settings and characters may, indeed, imply that the treatise is no complete literary fiction. However, this does not mean that the literary character of *Quaestiones convivales* should, therefore, be underestimated. Again in the preface to the first Book (*Quaest. conv. 612DE, cf. also 686D*), Plutarch places his work in the wider tradition of philosophical symposium literature, thus joining the line of several coryphaei in the genre (Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, Speusippus, Epicurus, Prytanis, Hieronymus, and Dio from the Academy). The fact that Plutarch emphatically presents his work as a sample of this literary-philosophical tradition has cast considerable doubt on the historical character of its contents. The view, however, that Plutarch is merely instrumentalising...
the sympotic genre to disseminate his own variegated investigations to a wider public – that is, by using it as a purely literary fiction – does not hold against serious criticism either. It remains to be seen, therefore, to what extent the lively descriptions of the sympotic discussions are faithful renderings or rather literary replicas of historic, real-life events.

Scholars have tried to reconcile both viewpoints, by arguing that in *Quaestiones convivales*, Plutarch intertwines sympotic authenticity with literary allusions. One can imagine that most of the talks are rooted in discussions that actually took place on a given occasion. Perhaps at certain points, they even contain the core positions defended by each of Plutarch’s fellow symposiasts, but this is uncertain, and does not necessarily rule out the author’s own interventions. Indeed, the sympotic discussions may very well contain a certain degree of additional aetiological elaboration and reorganisation of the arguments based on Plutarch’s own research and reading. The following indications may support this theory.

First of all, Plutarch does not partake as a sympotic character in the discussion in 28 chapters. This has led many scholars to the suspicion that a considerable part of the work is fictional. While this certainly casts doubt on the historicity of these chapters, however, from a narratological perspective perhaps Plutarch is making a certain Platonic gesture, viz. by stressing the authorial role of reportage in the recording of these sympotic discussions. Indeed, Plato himself is also absent in his *Symposium*, and his absence in the *Phaedo* is illustrious.

Second, the attempt to maintain an aspect of historical verisimilitude does not seem to be equally successful in each and every sympotic discussion. Some of the chapters are less circumstantial when it comes to historical detail and sympotic liveliness (see n. 50). In these cases, the description of the sympotic setting does not receive a great deal of dramatic substantiation. In some cases, the portraits of the symposiasts, who are normally characterised by their personal interests, occupations and idiosyncrasies, remain rather vague (Plutarch there simply uses such generic situational markers as οἱ μὲν, οἱ δὲ, ἔνιοι, ἐδόκει, ἐλέχθη, ποτέ etc.). In some chapters, Plutarch does not mention the name of any of the

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83 See, e.g., A. Gudeman, 1927, col. 2526.

84 Thanks are due to K. Oikonomopoulou for this suggestion.

symposiasts, but simply lines up a number of arguments anonymously without attributing them to specific persons (e.g., *Quaest. conv.* 619BF, 625AC). By putting the main focus on the development of the arguments, these chapters give the impression of being short expositions, rather than the condensation of real-life discussions\(^86\) (even if the author attempts to maintain the illusion of reality by creating an artificial setting and evoking “un air de vérité”\(^87\)). However, it may well be that these artificial table talks are simply rendered in summary or paraphrase due to selective or faulty recollection of the author\(^88\).

Third, the use of lengthy monologues in the argumentations in *Quaestiones convivales* seem to betray the author’s intervention, since it is unlikely that we are dealing in these cases with the symposiasts’ *verba ipsissima* exactly as they were uttered (e.g., *Quaest. conv.* 629E–634F; the same is true for the use of indirect speech: e.g., *Quaest. conv.* 620A). If it is true, moreover, that these passages do contain at least a certain nucleus of authenticity\(^89\), Plutarch may very well have made further elaborations and revisions to them. Since Plutarch may in some cases simply be using the literary characters of his fellow symposiasts as *porte-paroles* to voice his own opinions – a literary strategy with which he was not at all unfamiliar\(^90\) –, it is not unimaginable that he intended to bring some kind of an intellectual tribute to his sympotic colleagues by labelling the explanations to the questions with their proper names and by staging them in, what, thus, turns out to be, a sympotic *liber amicorum*. In a way he, thus, immortalised his friends in this learned *Festschrift*.

Since the question of historicity and fiction in *Quaestiones convivales*, cannot be settled with any certainty or precision, it is safe to conclude with Titchener that “the QC do not need to be authentic to be real and true”\(^91\).

\(^86\) A comparison with the fictitious *Septem sapientium convivium* is never far away in these cases. Cf. A. Gudeman, 1927, col. 2526 and F. Fuhrmann, 1972, p. ix. On the place of Plutarch’s *Septem sapientium convivium* in the tradition of symposium literature, see J. Mossman, 1997b.

\(^87\) F. Fuhrmann, 1972, p. xvii. Cf. also pp. ix–x and xviii: “nous pouvons au moins accepter comme historiques ceux auxquels se rapporte la relation la plus circonstanciée”.

\(^88\) Some symposia perhaps do have that effect on a person’s memory. Thanks are again due to K. Oikonomopoulou for this suggestion.


\(^90\) Plutarch’s brother Lamprias, for instance, is often considered the literary delegate and mouthpiece of the Chaeronean’s own opinions. For the role of Lamprias as narrator in *De defectu oraculorum*, see, e.g., F.C. Babbitt, 1936b, p. 349: “some have thought that Plutarch has used the person of Lamprias to represent himself, possibly because of the official position held by Plutarch at Delphi.” Cf. also F. Ferrari, 1995, pp. 30–31. For Lamprias’ role in *De facie*, see P. Donini, 2011, p. 36.

“What the QC present us with is something a little in between: what at least conveys the texture of what MIGHT have happened, COULD have happened, and periodically HAD in fact happened. For Plutarch’s purposes, this is really all the same thing […]”

As such, Quaestiones convivales vividly portrays the intellectual practice of symotic debate as held in Plutarch’s milieu, albeit in a dramatised and idealised fashion, with the goal of making these discussions accessible to posterity, much like Plato, Xenophon and other authors had done before (cf. Quaest. conv. 612DE, 686D). Scholars generally agree that a complex embroidery and reorganisation of hypomnematic material lies beneath the surface of the text in Quaestiones convivales. This hypomnematic material was composed by the author on the basis of his own recollections, reading and research. As stated, this hypomnematic material has often been associated, and in some imprudent cases even identified, with Plutarch’s collections of quaestiones, but this seems unlikely for several reasons, as will be set out in the following section.

2. Problems and personal notes

Contemporary Plutarch scholarship has devoted a great deal of its attention to the Chaeronean’s use of personal notes (ὑπομνήματα) both in composing the Moralia and the Vitae. In this section, I will examine the nature and function of these notes more closely with the goal of distinguishing them from Plutarch’s collections of problems. A locus classicus is the ὑπομνήματα statement in the introduction to De tranquillitate animi (464E–465A). Close analysis of this passage will yield important information.

92 Ibid. A similar conclusion was made, e.g., for the discussion recorded in De sollertia animalium by J. Bouffartigue, 2012, p. xix: “On retiendra l’idée de “forme idéalisée”, en ne perdant pas de vue que Plutarque n’écrit pas un reportage.”

93 See, e.g., J. Sirinelli, 2000, pp. 380–385 and p. 386: “On est tenté de donner comme sous-titre à cet ouvrage: un homme se penche sur son fichier!” The phrase ὡς ἕκαστον εἰς μνήμην ἦλθεν in Quaest. conv. 629D (discussed earlier [1.1.5.]) should perhaps be taken as an implicit allusion to Plutarch’s reliance on his ὑπομνήματα.


96 For a detailed analysis of this passage, see esp. L. Van der Stockt, 1999a, pp. 577–580 (see also 1996, pp. 265–266 and 2004, p. 333).
about Plutarch’s general writing technique and his use of personal notes more specifically.

The introduction to *De tranquillitate animi* (464E–465A) highlights the efficiency with which Plutarch accessed and used his personal notebooks, by highlighting the short period of time in which he completed the treatise on the basis of his ὑπομνήματα. Plutarch apologises to his correspondent Paccius for the haste with which the work was put together – ‘I did not have the time I desired’ (μήτε δὲ χρόνον ἔχων, ὡς προηρούμην) – and explains that he only recently (ὄψε, being the very first word of the treatise) received Paccius’ petition urging him to write ‘something on tranquility of mind, and also something on those subjects in the *Timaeus* which require more careful elucidation’ (464E: παρεκάλεις περὶ εὐθυμίας σοί τι γραφῆναι καὶ περὶ τῶν ἐν Τιμαίῳ δεομένων ἐπιμελεστέρας ἐξηγήσεως). In *De tranquillitate animi*, Plutarch grants only the first part of Paccius’ request (I will come back later to the second part about the subjects in the *Timaeus* [see 2.4.1.]).

Plutarch adds that their beloved friend Eros, with whom he could send the treatise to Paccius, was in a hurry (ἐπιταχύνοντα) to get back to Rome. In the same breath, he admits that the hasty composition had a strong effect on the composition of the treatise, and that Paccius, therefore, should not expect to find a fully embellished literary work, but rather an edited sequence of rough material. Most importantly, Plutarch states that he ‘extracted the topic of tranquility from the notes that I took for myself’ (464F: ἀνελεξάμην περὶ εὐθυμίας ἐκ τῶν ὑπομνημάτων ὧν ἐμαυτῷ πεποιημένος ἐτύγχανον). As Van der Stockt notes, the translation of the phrase περὶ εὐθυμίας is not unproblematic: “he [sc. Plutarch] does not say that the actual theme of these hypomnemata was ‘tranquility’! […] On the other hand, neither does Plutarch deny that he consulted ‘hypomnemata on tranquility’.” 97 The phrase περὶ εὐθυμίας can be understood as a reference to the similar wording (περὶ εὐθυμίας τι) in Paccius’ request, and can thus be interpreted as a periphrasis of the direct object (‘I extracted <something> on tranquility from my notes’). It remains uncertain, therefore, whether Plutarch’s notes were ordered thematically or not, but if his use of these notes was a standard practice for the composition of most of his writings – which is commonly accepted today –, this would certainly have facilitated the job.98

In regards to the actual composition of *De tranquillitate animi*, one can vividly imagine Plutarch sitting at his writing desk, browsing through the personal notes that he amassed, perhaps over a fairly long period of time, from his own reading and research, and selecting the material that he found fit for transfer to his peer in Rome. When it comes to the precise purpose of

97 L. Van der Stockt, 1999a, pp. 578–579.
drawing up notes, Plutarch indicates that he does this for personal reasons, viz. ‘for myself’ (De tranq. an. 464F: ἐμαυτῷ). Plutarch’s notes were, therefore, primarily composed “by himself and for himself”99. With ἐμαυτῷ, Plutarch, thus, indicates that the notes were intended to serve his own memory. In this sense, they preserve material and thoughts that were dear to him, that is, in which he was personally interested. It was not Plutarch’s intention to keep this knowledge to himself, though. On the contrary, they served a more practical goal in securing knowledge and personal reflections that could later be revisited. These notes are made accessible to Paccius in such a way as to, first and foremost, cater to his practical ethical needs. Paccius’ main concern is, so Plutarch assumes, not one of literary ‘calligraphy’: he expects practical information and instruction on the topic (464F: ἡγούμενος καὶ σὲ τὸν λόγον τούτον σώκ ἀκροάσεως ἑνεκα θηρωμένης καλλιγραφίας ἀλλὰ χρείας βοηθητικῆς ἐπιζητεῖν καὶ συνηθίζομενος).

Van der Stockt is probably correct in suggesting that Plutarch is not taking refuge in a literary τόπος here100. In fact, as a meticulous analysis of De tranquillitate animi would suggest, Plutarch’s re-editing of his rudimentary notes does not so much aim at an upgrade of the literary stylistics, but rather at a reorganisation of that material by presenting it as a more or less continuous line of thought (with some inevitable defects

99 L. Van der Stockt, 1999a, p. 579. Therefore, when speaking of Plutarch’s ὑπομνήματα in this study, I do this in reference to his ‘personal notes’, as understood by Van der Stockt and the Leuven school of Plutarchists. I am well aware, however, that Plutarch – and with him many other ancient authors – used the term ὑπομνήματα (and other concepts derived from it, e.g. ὑπομνήματισμοί) not only for private documents, but also for published works: e.g., the journals of Sulla (Sull. 5, 5) or Caesar (Comp. Dem. et Cic. 3, 1, Ant. 15, 5). Some treatises on ethical matters are also designated as being ὑπομνήματα by Plutarch (De Al. Magn. fort. 328A). In Adv. Col. 1115B, Plutarch refers more specifically to Aristotle’s physical and ethical ὑπομνήματα. The term is also used for other public records (e.g., Sol. 11, 2 and De fort. Rom. 326A). It is even used for certain institutions, like festivals (e.g., Cam. 33, 7). See L. Van der Stockt, 1999a, p. 576, with n. 18. See already A. von Premerstein, 1900, cols. 726–757 and F. Bömer, 1953, esp. pp. 215–226. Seeing that these are mostly published works, scholars speak of a genuine hypomnematic genre in ancient literature (A. von Premerstein, 1900, cols. 757–759, esp. col. 757 for scientific and technical commentarii, F. Bömer, 1953 and D. Amboglio, 1990, p. 503, esp. p. 506 for Plutarch’s notion of ὑπομνήματα). The concept of ὑπομνήματα was also used, e.g., for technical commentaries on philosophical texts (see, e.g., F. Ferrari and L. Baldi, 2002, pp. 12–16).

in form and structure, though). As a consequence, the reader should not expect to find a highly embellished discourse, but rather one that remains relatively simple, concise, and contains information that is pertinent for direct instruction.

We do not know what Plutarch’s personal notes looked like in terms of their level of composition and elaboration. Van der Stockt is inclined to conceive of a Plutarchan ὑπόμνημα “as a more or less elaborate train of thought, involving material previously gathered and certainly written in full syntactical sentences: we are beyond the stage of heuristics”101. Regarding its level of composition, he believes that a ὑπόμνημα “does not yet display literary finish” but “probably took the form of a rough draft”102. This brings us very close to the compositional level of the genre of problems, as described in the previous chapter [see 1.2.3.], but it remains to be seen whether the genre of problems can actually be considered hypomnematic, and, if so, to what extent.

In order to answer this question, let us return for a moment to the earlier mention of the complex embroidery and reorganisation of hypomnematic material in Quaestiones convivales, particularly in light of what Fuhrmann says:

“Les Propos de Table sont, en grande partie, des développements […] de notes prises par Plutarque sur ses lectures, notes tout à fait

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101 L. Van der Stockt, 1999a, p. 595. Plutarch’s assembling and compiling (συνάγειν, συντάττειν) of material as a preparatory phase for the composition of his texts is explicitly marked, e.g., in Cons. ad Apoll. 121E, Coni. praec. 138C, De coh. iva 457D, and Nic. 1, 5.

102 Ibid. Similarly, K. Ziegler, 1951, col. 787 argues that the term ὑπομνήματα in De tranq. an. 464F “ja nicht nur Auszüge aus Quellenschriften, sondern mindestens in gleichem Maße auch Niederschriften eigener Gedankengange bezeichnet”. Cf. L. Van der Stockt, 1999a, p. 576: “we are not entitled to view hypomnemata as sources”. Cf. also, e.g., R.H. Barrow, 1967, pp. 66–76, 109–110 and esp. p. 153: “Plutarch’s notebooks contained not only quotations which seemed to him of appeal or of use, no doubt classified, but also summaries and abstracts, some at length, some little more than main headings, and no doubt the innumerable miscellaneous jottings which so assiduous a collector could not resist.” This is not, of course, to reject the basic doxographical interests of Plutarch’s notes. In De coh. iva 457DE, Fundanus (who is considered Plutarch’s spokesman: see H. Martin, 1969, p. 69, with n. 30) states that he ‘collects and peruses sayings and deeds of both philosophers and kings and tyrants’ (συνάγειν ἀεὶ πειρῶμαι καὶ ἀναγινώσκειν ὑμᾶν ἀεί τῶν φιλοσόφων, οὐ δὲ γεγονός ἢ ἔχοι ἢ ἔχοιν σόοι ἔχοντες, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τὰ τῶν βασιλέων καὶ τυράννων). Cf. also J. Opsomer, 1994a, p. 8 (with n. 15). The sayings and deeds of tyrants are collected in Plutarch’s collections of Apophthegmata; those of philosophers are no longer extant. For further discussion on the use and status of Plutarch’s collections of Apophthegmata, see P.A. Stadler, 2008 and M. Beck, 2010 (who distinguish the Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata, as opposed to the Apophthegmata Laconica, from Plutarch’s ‘primary’ ὑπομνήματα).
semblables à ses Questions Grecques, Romaines, Physiques et aux Problèmes attribués à Aristote. Comme dans ces recueils, plusieurs réponses étaient données à chaque question, avec quelquefois une explication propre à l’auteur lui-même."

Other scholars would not care as much to make any distinction between Plutarch’s notes and problems as Fuhrmann does here (he writes “tou à fait semblables”)\textsuperscript{104}. It remains unclear, however, how much Fuhrmann himself would actually distance Plutarch’s problems from his notes, since he agrees with Bolkestein (in what immediately follows after the quoted passage) that \textit{Quaest. Rom.} 64, 279DE and 75, 281F are authentic ὑπομνήματα for the parallel accounts in \textit{Quaest. conv.} 702Dff. (on the ancient Roman custom of not allowing a table to be removed empty after eating, nor to let a lamp be extinguished)\textsuperscript{105}. Elsewhere, Fuhrmann describes these “notes” as “ces ébauches” or “recueils inférieurs”\textsuperscript{106}, presumably in light of the absence of καλλιγραφία mentioned in \textit{De tranq. an.} 464F.

One may wonder, however, why Fuhrmann leaves the \textit{Quaestiones Platonicae} unmentioned. Is it because these are ζητήματα rather than αἰτίαι and display a higher degree of elaboration, as can be inferred from their average length [see 1.1.6., n. 153]? Even then, other scholars include this collection among Plutarch’s preparatory notes just as well, by arguing that it represents the raw material waiting to be incorporated in other writings, including \textit{Quaestiones convivales}\textsuperscript{107}. According

\textsuperscript{103} F. Fuhrmann, 1972, p. xiii. Cf. also K. Hubert, 1911, pp. 174–176 and H. Bolkestein, 1946, p. 27. According to S.-T. Teodorsson, 2009, pp. 14–15, \textit{Quaestiones convivales} is “based in part on his own [sc. Plutarch’s] remembrances and notes and in addition on collections of Problemata and Zetemata and a great number of other sources”.

\textsuperscript{104} According to H.J. Rose, 1924, p. 51, \textit{Quaestiones Romanae} is, in fact, “a series of selections from reading-notes” (cf. also pp. 48–49). Regarding \textit{Quaestiones Romanae, Graecae} and \textit{barbaricae}, R.H. Barrow, 1967, p. 66 argues in a similar way that these are drawn from Plutarch’s reading-notes (cf. also p. 69). See also W.R. Halliday, 1928, p. 13: “The matter of both [sc. \textit{Quaestiones Romanae} and \textit{Graecae}] is derived from literary sources, and they consist essentially of a collection of notes, which Plutarch has put together, perhaps over a fairly long period, from his miscellaneous reading.” Cf. also A. Carrano, 2007, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{105} F. Fuhrmann, 1972, p. xiii and H. Bolkestein, 1946, pp. 27–35.

\textsuperscript{106} F. Fuhrmann, 1964, p. 19 (cf. also 1972, p. xix, n. 2).

\textsuperscript{107} Cf. H. Cherniss, 1976, p. 2. He believes that we are dealing in \textit{Quaestiones Platonicae} with what we today would call ‘collected notes’, which he distinguishes from their literary equivalent, the symposium (alluding to \textit{Quaestiones convivales}). He does not deny, however, that these collected notes and symposia could both be made available to interested readers [see 2.4.1.]. Cherniss notes, moreover (p. 3) that “Plutarch himself in his \textit{Symposiaca} uses the term ζητήματα of the questions or problems there propounded and discussed, of which several without their literary embellishment could appropriately
to Opsomer, however, there can be absolutely no doubt that these are not rudimentary or simple notes:

“Les Questions Platoniciennes ont une structure bien organisée et élaborée et il serait incorrect de penser qu’elles ne contiennent que le matériel brut. En outre, elles sont plus que de simples notes personelles (ὑπομνήματα). La structuration et la construction méticuleuses des différentes Questions nous indiquent qu’elles ont été préparées pour être publiées.”

The same seems to be the case for Plutarch’s *Quaestiones naturales*. In this work, the aspect of elaboration is confirmed by the author’s ample collection of content matter and also by such formal characteristics as, for instance, the use of full syntactical sentences with hypotactic structures, the presence of rhetorical elements, including emphatic addresses to the reader, the global structuring of the aetiologies along the principle of increasing plausibility, and the thematic clustering of problem chapters around specific topics.

I will come back to the issue of the publication of Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* later on [see 2.4.1.]. What is important here is the idea that Plutarch’s simple notes only contain the rough and unfinished material (these are the ὑπομνήματα mentioned in *De tranq. an.* 464F), whereas Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* display a higher level of elaboration. As a result, the level of composition of Plutarch’s *quaestiones* is not situated at the primary level of the simple notes, but at a higher, secondary level of elaboration, where remnants of the original hypomnematic material are incorporated at certain points and further elaborated upon to fit the arguments at hand. The same conclusion was made by Senzasono:

have been included in the *Platonic Questions*, just as all the latter could have been used as material for the *Symposiacs.* Such Platonic questions are raised in *Quaest. conv.* 697F, 700C, 718B and 739E. He also argues (p. 4, n. b) that *De def. or.* 421E–431A is perhaps an elaboration of a Platonic ζήτημα devoted to a passage in *Tim.* 55cd (on the number of worlds). Cf. also K. Ziegler, 1951, col. 834.

108 Opsomer, 1996a, p. 83 (see also 1994a, p. 12 and 2010, p. 95).

109 Opsomer (ibid.) does not explicitly deny the idea that we may be dealing with more complex notes in Plutarch’s *Quaestiones Platonicae*, as opposed to more simple ones, but he does not explicitly assert this either (in 2010, p. 115 he notes, however, that the ὑπομνήμα Plutarch possibly used in composing the fifth *Quaestio Platonica* may have had a specific ‘problematic’ organisation itself). This distinction may be relevant here, as there may be some ground for assuming a substantial difference in gradation between rudimentary, simple notes and more elaborate, complex ones without further terminological discrimination being made by Plutarch himself (cf. also n. 99). The distinction between simple and complex notes may have some concrete basis in other, more or less, contemporary miscellanistic authors. For instance, Gellius’ conception
“Cosí, nel complesso, le *Quaest. nat.*, nate forse come raccolta di appunti, presentano un ordine e una struttura stilistica che hanno le caratteristiche che abbiamo indicato, frutta d’indubia elaborazione formale.” “Plutarcho ha rifinito lo stile, forse partendo da appunti […]. Lo stile induce a supporre che Plutarco abbia formalizzato degli appunti presi per interesse scientifico […].”

Seeing that the level of elaboration of *Quaestiones naturales* oscillates between simple notes and a fully elaborated treatise, it is not so remarkable that some hypomnemetic features are still noticeable in the collection. Even though there is a certain degree of elaboration of the content and structure in Plutarch’s *quaestiones*, a specific element of, what can be labelled, ‘hypomnemetic negligence’ has not been eliminated. This negligence involves a compositional sloppiness at times that takes effect on several levels of the discourse. In the case of *Quaestiones naturales*, Plutarch’s desire to be both precise and concise in his rendering of the arguments often ends up in obscurity (e.g., *Q.N.* 4, 913A: the comparative ἀναγκαιότερα is confusing). At times, he is also rather careless in using sources (e.g., *Q.N.* 1, 911E: Aristotle does not vindicate but, rather, reject the popular belief that seawater contains burnt earth) and is sometimes inaccurate and inexact in his claims (e.g., *Q.N.* 5, 913AB: Plutarch says that there are eight generic flavourings but sums up nine). Likewise, his cross-references between successive problems are not always successful (e.g., *Q.N.* 24, 917F contains a ghost-reference to what was previously said but cannot be clearly retraced). Sometimes, Plutarch does not answer a question in its entirety (e.g., *Q.N.* 21, 917B: he does not explain why all of the wild sows farrow at the same time, nor why

of ‘notes’ in his preface to the *Noctes Atticae* is confused or at least confusing. In *NA Praef.* 2–4 Gellius designates *Noctes Atticae* as being *commentarii*, *commentationes* or a *commentarius* in itself, but he also refers to the *annotationes* (*ad subsidium memoriae*) that provided the primary material for that work. See T. Dorandi, 2000, pp. 39–42 and L. Holford-Strevens, 2003, p. 33. There are four instances, moreover, where Gellius draws from Plutarch’s *Quaestiones convivales*. In each of these passages, Gellius simply ignores the sympotic setting, so that the style of the *commentatio* comes close to that of a relatively unembellished problem. These passages are discussed by F. Klotz and K. Oikonomopoulou, 2011, pp. 235–236. See also L. Holford-Strevens, 2003, pp. 283–285. The passages at issue (with their parallel in *Quaestiones convivales*) are *NA* 3, 5 (~ *Quaest. conv.* 705E); 3, 6 (~ *Quaest. conv.* 724EF); 4, 11, 13 (~ *Quaest. conv.* 730B); 17, 11 (~ *Quaest. conv.* 697F–700B).

110 L. Sensasono, 2006, pp. 18 and 45.

111 L. Van der Stockt, 2011, p. 452, n. 30 reached a similar conclusion: “The relative lack of embellishment […] of *QN* may reflect the intermediary stage between hypomnema and formal edition.”

112 For the aspect of compositional negligence in Plutarch’s ὑπομνήματα, cf. also L. Van der Stockt, 1987, p. 287.
domesticated ones farrow at various moments), or the question itself is formulated badly (e.g., Q.N. 19, 916B: Plutarch criticises Theophrastus for explaining only the octopus’ change of colour and not also its adaptation, but in the quaestio he himself mentions only the change). Arguably, these aspects of hypomnematic negligence can be attributed to the speed with which Plutarch composed his quaestiones. Signs of hasty composition have also been detected, for instance, in Quaestiones convivales\textsuperscript{113}, and the haste with which Plutarch made extractions from his personal notes is known from the ὑπομνήματα statement itself, discussed above (De tranq. an. 464E–465A).

From reading Quaestiones naturales one gets the impression that Plutarch not only tries to maintain the clarity but also the momentum of his streams of thought. The hypomnematic character of this work can be connected with the style of discourse of the Ps.-Aristotelian Problems (which underlines the relevance of the genre again [see 1.2.5.]). Indeed, scholars have argued that the Problems also have a specific hypomnematic disposition, to be explained in light of its educational origins\textsuperscript{114}. In fact, already in the 6\textsuperscript{th} century AD the hypomnematic character of the Aristotelian Problems was recognised on the basis of the collection’s form and presentation. In the preface to his Commentary on Aristotle’s Categories, the commentator Elias (David) draws up a classification of Aristotle’s writings by distinguishing the so-called hypomnematic from the syntagmatic works\textsuperscript{115}. As opposed to the syntagmatic works, the hypomnematic ones record only the gist of the matter (114, 2: ὑπομνηματικά μὲν λέγονται ἐν οἷς μόνα τὰ κεφάλαια ἀπεγράφησαν). They are further narrowed down into uniform and miscellaneous writings (114, 8: τῶν δὲ ὑπομνηματικῶν τὰ μὲν μονοειδῆ τὰ δὲ ποικίλα). Among the miscellaneous hypomnematic writings, Elias lists a collection of ἑβδομήκοντα βιβλία Περὶ συμμίκτων

\textsuperscript{113} See F. Fuhrmann, 1972, pp. ix–x and J. Sirinelli, 2000, p. 369. Notably, in Quaest. conv. 612E, Plutarch promises to Sossius Senecio to send the rest of the work quickly (ταχέως). On signs of hasty composition also in the Vitae (attributed to the same Sossius Senecio), see C.T. Michaēlis, 1875, pp. 8–9 and C. Pelling, 1979, pp. 95–96.

\textsuperscript{114} According to C. Jacob, 2004, pp. 43–44, for instance, Ps.-Aristotle’s Problems are not as such “hypomēmata désordonnés et hétéroergènes” but still “ébauches rédactionnelles”: “On y trouverait non seulement un recueil de phénomènes, mais aussi les premières versions d’explications qui seront reprises, complétées ou remplacées dans les textes plus systématiques.” Cf. also P. Louis, 1991, pp. xx, xxv and xxix: “Le style est révélateur de ce genre d’écrits. Les phrases sont souvent mal construites. Certaines sont incomplètes. Elles sont tantôt très courtes, tantôt exagérément longues, avec parfois plusieurs incises qui les rendent difficiles à comprendre. Il arrive même qu’elles se contredisent. N’est-ce pas là la marque de phrases rédigées ou copiées à la hâte? Mais ce qui fait justement l’intérêt de la plupart de ces problèmes, c’est la spontanéité du premier jet.”

\textsuperscript{115} For further discussion of Elias’ account (and similar accounts in the works of other Aristotle commentators), see T. Dorandi, 2000, p. 85.
ζητημάτων (114, 13–14), which probably included the Ps.-Aristotelian Problems [see 1.1.3., n. 87]. Similar to the educational context in which Ps.-Aristotle’s Problems were composed (c.q. Aristotle’s Lyceum), the composition of Quaestiones naturales can be interpreted in light of the author’s activities in his philosophical school (I will deal with Plutarch’s school activity in the next chapter [see 3.1.4.]). Full elaboration of the style of the natural problems was not necessary, at least if the basic line of thought was sufficiently elucidated for a good understanding by the implied readership. It turns out that mainly for educational purposes, then, Plutarch, much like Ps.-Aristotle, was mainly concerned with the gist of the matter rather than the form. The fact that Quaestiones naturales still has certain hypomnematic traits should not necessarily come at the cost of the work’s autonomous position in the corpus Plutarcheum, but should rather be explained in light of the eventual purpose of the collection as a school text. As such, Plutarch’s collections of quaestiones more generally created an independent space for the author to collect his personal research and findings in a thematic fashion, a point that will be further substantiated for Quaestiones naturales in the following section.

3. Zetetic autonomy in Quaestiones naturales

As argued previously, Plutarch did not compose Quaestiones naturales (or his other collections of quaestiones) as a hypomnematic Fundgrube of materials to be exploited for the redaction of his other writings. It is not just a collection of residual problems that Plutarch simply had no room for in Quaestiones convivales (or elsewhere). It may very well be the case, however, that, as a consequence of his decision to restrict each Book of Quaestiones convivales to ten chapters only, Plutarch ran out of space at certain points in the process of composing this work (see n. 54).

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117 Therefore, K. Ziegler, 1951, col. 857 (cf. also col. 887) rightly remains uncertain when he wonders: “Ist es [sc. Quaestiones naturales] vielleicht ein Rest von Materialien, die in die Symposiaka nicht mehr Aufnahme fanden?” In my opinion, the answer is negative. Notably, Ziegler vindicates the autonomy of Quaestiones Romanae (vis-à-vis the Vitae) with less doubt (col. 860).

118 Plutarch’s own established rule of a fixed number of ten chapters for each Book is in itself a severe restriction of the work’s scope, but at the same time it is also a realistic decision on the side of the author not to chase encyclopaedic comprehensiveness. There are some ways to create extra space, though. Two problems can, for instance, merge under one heading (e.g., Quaest. conv. 664A, 684E, 700BC, 706E, 717A, 723A, 725F, 727A, 740F). Moreover, in Book nine Plutarch makes an explicit exception to his own rule of a
Remarkably enough, some of the problems that are only mentioned in passing in *Quaestiones convivales*, receive detailed elaboration in *Quaestiones naturales*. These I will discuss below in order to illustrate that the separate and meticulous treatment of these problems speaks to the autonomous character of *Quaestiones naturales*, rather than to their status of zetetic leftovers.

In *Quaest. conv. 724EF*, first of all, Plutarch compares the palm tree with a well-trained athlete, who possesses an un bendable vigour both in body and mind. A piece of palm wood is said to curve upward as though resisting a weight imposed upon it. It is only in *Q.N.* 32 that Plutarch provides an extensive aetiology for this natural phenomenon (amounting to three explanations in total). Similarly, in *Quaest. conv. 700F*, no one of the symposiasts ventures upon an explanation of the sweet tears of wild boars as opposed to the salty tears of deer, a detailed inquiry of which is offered in *Q.N.* 20\(^{119}\) (which contains two explanations). The natural phenomenon of wild figs preventing domesticated figs from dropping their fruit, and thereby promoting their ripening, is mentioned in the same passage. This phenomenon is explained in the course of *Q.N.* 41 (containing one extensive explanation), but remains without an explanation in *Quaest. conv. 700F*.

Both phenomena of tears and figs (among others) serve as paradoxographical examples that Euthydemus and Patrocleas cite from their experience in farming and hunting (700E: οὐκ ὀλίγα τοιαῦτα τῶν ἀπὸ γεωργίας καὶ κυνηγίας προφέροντας) in order to support Plutarch’s excuse for not accounting for the central problem of the so-called horncast seeds\(^{120}\).

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fixed number of ten chapters for each Book under the pretext of bringing an appropriate tribute to the nine Muses on their own festival (this is the setting of the fifteen chapters that follow). See *Quaest. conv. 736C*: ὁ δ’ ἀριθμὸς ἐν ὑπερβάλλει τὴν συνήθη δεκάδα τῶν ζητημάτων, οὐθεμαστέον· ἔδει γὰρ γὰρ πάντα ταῖς Μούσαις ἀποδοῦναι τὰ τῶν Μουσῶν καὶ μηδὲν ἀφελεῖν ὥσπερ ἀφ’ ἱερῶν, πλεῖστα καὶ καλλίστα τούτων ἄφελεντας αὐταῖς. According to S.-T. Teodorsson, 1996, p. 300, “[p]erhaps we may suppose that Plutarch, when setting out to write book IX, happened to see that he had a number of interesting questions left which he could not refrain from including.” However, in this last Book no natural problems are discussed after the manner of *Quaestiones naturales*. Chapters 10 through 12 concerned natural problems in a more general sense, though, as we can learn from the titles of the lost chapters (talks 10 and 12 deal with more astronomical issues, and talk 11 with an ontological rather than a physical problem).

\(^{119}\) The same observation was made by F.H. Sandbach, 1965, pp. 138 and 193, n. b. He adds that *Q.N.* 20 may, therefore, be composed subsequently to *Quaest. conv.* 700F, or that they are at least contemporaneous, but this is uncertain. Cf. S.-T. Teodorsson, 1996, pp. 40–41 (see also further).

\(^{120}\) According to S.-T. Teodorsson, 1996, p. 41 the phenomena mentioned in *Quaest. conv.* 700F are only enumerated as examples here, because there existed well-known explanations for them (as *Q.N.* 20 and 41 show). Cf. also L. Senzasono, 2006, p. 202, n. 108.
In what follows, Florus asserts that these (and similar) problems are not childish nonsense, and that they should not be given up as insoluble (701A: Ἐπεὶ δὲ τοῦτο μὲν ὁ Φλῶρος ᾤετο παιδιὰν εἶναι καὶ φλύαρον, ἐκεῖνον δὲ οὐκ ἄν τινα τῆς αἰτίας ὡς ἀλήπτου προέσθαι τὴν ἄρησιν)121. This is, indeed, proven by the aetiologies in Q.N. 20 and 41, where extensive explanations are found. The fact, then, that the two problems at issue are only mentioned in passing and remain “notoriously unsolved”122 in Quaestiones convivales, whereas they do receive a detailed aetiology in Quaestiones naturales, is very significant, since it suggests that Quaestiones naturales does not necessarily ‘need’ the sympotic framework of Quaestiones convivales to accomplish its own zetetic goal. Or in other words: Plutarch does not necessarily require a boost of wine to solve these problems (cf. Quaest. conv. 700E: τὰς ζητήσεις πολὺ προθυμοτέρας καὶ δραστύτερας τὰς ἀποφάνσεις τοῦ ὀίνου ποιοῦντος). If the two chapters in Quaestiones naturales where these problems are solved (i.e. Q.N. 20 and 41) are to be considered editorial remains – on the uncertain assumption, nota bene, that their composition is chronologically prior to or contemporary with that of the discussions in Quaestiones convivales –, why are they worked up in such aetiological detail? Why did Plutarch not simply delete them altogether? If it is because they were composed subsequently to Quaestiones convivales, we cannot speak of them as leftovers at all, but rather as a continuation of the same zetetic project (but then again, matters of chronology remain unclear [see the prologue]).

Rather than assuming that the research conducted in Quaestiones naturales is actually done ‘for’ Quaestiones convivales, I firmly believe that it is at least equally plausible that Plutarch relies on, incorporates and elaborates the same or similar hypomnematic material into the problematic framework of Quaestiones naturales as well as into the more dramatised and literary context of Quaestiones convivales123. This explains why there are numerous parallel passages between the two works, including their

121 What Florus presumably does consider to be παιδιά (if ἐκείνων in his reply, indeed, refers back to τῶν in Euthydemus’ account – as it does in the translation of E.L. Minar, F.H. Sandbach and W.C. Helmbold, 1961, p. 25) is what Euthydemus adds: these are the popular beliefs that celery grows better if it is trampled and crushed as it grows, and that the same is true for cumin if it is sown with curses and maledictions.

122 F.H. Sandbach, 1965, p. 193, n. b (Sandbach does not, however, mention the second parallel on fig trees). Solving these and similar problems is not considered a sinecure, though (cf. 700D: τὴν αἰτίαν ἀνεύρετον, 700DE: πράγμα πίστιν ἔχον δι’ ἄλλην, τὴν δ’ αἰτίαν ἔχον ἀποφαντέαν ἡ παγχάλεπαν).

123 Cf. F.H. Sandbach, 1965, p. 138: “A priori it might be guessed that the former [sc. Quaestiones naturales] provided raw material that was worked up into a literary form in the latter [sc. Quaestiones convivales]. […] The facts in general do not [however] seem to exclude the possibility that material found for the Symposiacs was used in composing the Quaestiones Naturales and vice versa.”
slight divergences in argument at times. It would also account for the fact that certain topics, as the cases above have shown, are touched upon only superficially in *Quaestiones convivales*, while they receive a separate and circumstantial aetiology in *Quaestiones naturales*. It is only reasonable, then, that *Quaestiones naturales* is not a zetetic appendix to *Quaestiones convivales*. In fact, one could turn the tables and argue, the other way round, as Harrison did, that:

“[*Quaestiones convivales*] allowed Plutarch to examine customs and phenomena that might not have found comfortable places within other of his *Ai̇tia* and the exegesis of which did not warrant a separate essay.”

Whatever may be the case, *Quaestiones naturales* clearly has a high degree of zetetic autonomy, offering to its author plenty of space for the treatment of natural problems mostly on their own terms (i.e. in view of their physical causality without much further consideration of matters regarding style, morality etc.). The same aspect of zetetic autonomy can also be presumed, then, for Plutarch’s other collections of *quaestiones* (viz. *Quaestiones Romanae*, *Graecae* and *Platonicae*), which, in this logic, portray several specialised fields of interest that reflect the author’s versatile research occupations. Let it be absolutely clear, however, that the notion of compository autonomy does not, of course, imply that Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* were composed in complete intellectual isolation from each other. As we will see in the following section, sometimes there are clear thematic overlaps between these works, meaning that they are part and parcel of a larger, overarching research project, a project inspired by Plutarch’s quest for all-round πολυμάθεια [see 2.4.2.].

Another point is that the differences in form between Plutarch’s *Quaestiones convivales* and his other collections of *quaestiones* involves a difference in implied reading and readership. I will argue in the next chapter that there are, indeed, good reasons to believe that there is a difference in authorial intention in these works [see 3.1.4.]. Before this is

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124 G.W.M. Harrison, 2000a, p. 197. In a similar vein, F. Klotz and K. Oikonomopoulou, 2011, p. 20 have pointed out that “the Table Talk’s inquiries are, in the overwhelming majority of cases, similar or approximate, but never identical to those of the other collections, suggesting that Plutarch self-consciously avoided close replication of material across the corpus. And, whereas its answers often employ scientific theories and arguments that are encountered in the other collections as well, they never do so with the same ends in view.”

125 As G.W.M. Harrison, 2000a, p. 198 has argued, therefore, “[o]ne hardly feels constrained any more to state that these essays were meant to stand on their own […].”
possible, however, we must first focus on the issue of publication itself of Plutarch’s *quaestiones*.

### 2.4. Opening up Plutarch’s zetetic archive

The aim of this section is to investigate the possibility of a publication of Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones*, and of *Quaestiones naturales* more specifically. What indications do we have that these works were published or were at least intended to be made public one way or another? A detailed answer to this question will, in turn, provide further food for thought in the next chapter about the educational context in which these collections were useful.

#### 1. The issue of publication: problems as functional literature

When it comes to the issue of publication of Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones*, only little is known with any certainty, leaving much room for conjecture. We will see here that there is reason to assume that Plutarch probably disclosed his collections of *quaestiones* to his students and close peers who presumably shared his interest for their different strands of inquiry. Plutarch’s philosophical school was, in all likelihood, situated in his own house in Chaeronea [see 3.1.2.]. Perhaps his students even took up residence there. Considering that Plutarch complains about the lamentable availability of books in small towns like his own126, one can very well imagine that he, in his role as a helpful teacher, not only allowed them access to his own library, but also to his thematically ordered collections of *quaestiones* that he had composed on the basis of his own readings and discussions. But of course, it is only likely that he also granted requests made by friends living abroad (as the *ὑπομνήματα* statement nicely illustrates; see above). Plutarch’s intellectual repute, although centered in Chaeronea, must have radiated throughout the entire Mediterranean region. As we will see in what follows, there are several indications to make these points more concrete.

Regarding Plutarch’s *Quaestiones Platonicae*, first of all, scholars have argued that they “might be made available to interested readers”127. Notably, in *Quaest. Plat.* 1003A, Plutarch reports that a specific issue ‘has already been frequently discussed by us’ (*τὸ πολλάκις ὑφ’ ἡμῶν λεγόμενον*)128. This phrase, and especially the use of the first person plural, would not have much sense unless a certain audience, presumably situated in the context

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128 See J. Opsomer, 1994a, p. 12 (see also 1996a, p. 83).
of Plutarch’s classroom, is implicitly being addressed by it\textsuperscript{129} (as we will see later on, similar personal forms can be found throughout Quaestiones naturales [see 3.1.4.]). Another indication of the publishable character of Quaestiones Platonicae is found in the υπομνήμαta statement in De tranq. an. 464E [see 2.3.2.]. As seen previously, this passage speaks of Paccius’ petition to Plutarch to write something not only περὶ εὐθυμίας but also περὶ τῶν ἐν Τιμαίῳ δεομένων ἐπιμελεστέρας ἐξηγήσεως. The part about the ‘passages in Timaeus that require further elucidation’ can, and has, been linked to the exegetical chapters on the Timaeus in Quaestiones Platonicae\textsuperscript{130}. Cherniss argued, in this regard, that the υπομνήματα that Plutarch mentions in De tranq. an. 464F probably contained “such things as our ζητήματα [sc. Quaestiones Platonicae] or the material for them”\textsuperscript{131}. The second seems more plausible, though\textsuperscript{132}. What is particularly unlikely, however, is that Plutarch eventually sent this Timaeus exegesis to Paccius in its rough hypomnematic form (after all, De tranquillitate animi are no rough υπομνήμαta either). Therefore, Plutarch probably elaborated this exegetical material, presumably in the form of one or more quaestiones, before handing it over to his friend Eros. If this is true, the passage at hand implies a transfer of one or more chapters from Quaestiones Platonicae to Rome. It would be absurd to claim, of course, that the geographical distance is a prerogative for the disclosure of such quaestiones. If Plutarch was prepared to disclose this knowledge to acquaintances living abroad, why would he not do the same for those living closer to home, viz. to his close students and friends\textsuperscript{133}?

\textsuperscript{129} J. Glucker, 1978, p. 264, n. 27 notes, moreover, that “[f]rom De An. Procr. 1012B, with its obvious reference to Plat. Quaest. it appears that it is his students in this particular lecture who demand an exposition of this problem. It thus seems that Plat. Quaest. owe their origin largely to things said (εἰρημένα) in the classroom” (also cited by J. Opsomer, 1994a, p. 13).

\textsuperscript{130} Quaest. Plat. 2, 1000E–1001C, 4, 1002E–1003B, 5, 1003B–1004C, 7, 1004D–1006B, 8, 1006B–1007E. Scholars have considered it unlikely that Paccius is referring here to De animae procreatione in Timaeo, because this treatise is composed (much like De tranquillitate animi itself) in the form of an open letter to the author’s sons Autobulus and Plutarch (1012A). However, De animae procreatione in Timaeo may in itself be based on one or more Quaestiones Platonicae, or rather on similar underlying notes. See H. Cherniss, 1976, p. 133 and F. Ferrari and L. Baldi, 2002, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{131} H. Cherniss, 1976, p. 4, n. b.

\textsuperscript{132} See J. Opsomer, 2010, pp. 94–95. Notably, Plutarch only mentions that he extracted περὶ εὐθυμίας from his personal notes, so the same is not necessarily true for the exegetical material of the Timaeus also, although this is not unlikely, of course. Paccius’ twofold petition can perhaps be taken to imply, then, that he asks Plutarch to send him something on tranquility and – since he presumably has to browse through his personal archive anyway – to attach some exegetical material regarding the Timaeus as well.

\textsuperscript{133} J. Glucker, 1978, p. 264 even argues that “it is not unlikely that his [sc. Plutarch’s]
Another indication of the publishable character of Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* is found in Plutarch’s aforementioned self-references to *Quaestiones Romanae* in *Cam*. 19, 8 (ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἐν τῷ Περὶ αἰτίων Ῥωμαϊκῶν ἐπιμελέστερον εἰρηγία) and in *Rom*. 15, 7 (Περὶ ὧν ἐπὶ πλέον ἐν τοῖς Αἰτίοις) [see 2.1.4.]. These references would be meaningless if the collection was meant for personal use only, that is, as a private set of inquiries into Roman antiquities that was not made accessible to the intended reader of the *Vitae*. Therefore, scholars have accepted that *Quaestiones Romanae* was published by Plutarch himself and made accessible to a broader circle of readers who were interested in such antiquarian matters. In this regard, it is important to note that these self-references explicitly indicate the aetiology to be more detailed in *Quaestiones Romanae* than in the *Vitae* (ἐπιμελέστερον ~ ἐπὶ πλέον). Plutarch, thus, openly promotes the antiquarian research from *Quaestiones Romanae* to the reader in these passages, by declaring that he has collected this kind of knowledge in a separate and more specialised way there. Arguably, due to the fact that the *Romulus* reference (considering the vagueness of the phrase ἐν τοῖς Αἰτίοις) is less precise than the *Camillus* reference (which specifically refers to *Quaestiones Romanae*), it is not unlikely that by the former, Plutarch is referring to his aetiological works in general, rather than to one specific collection of *quaestiones*. There is debate among scholars as to whether the *Romulus* reference refers specifically to *Quaestiones Romanae* or, more generally, to the entire triptych collection of *Quaestiones Romanae*,

Platonicae *Quaestiones* were written among other things, in response to such [c.q. Paccius’] inquiries”, but it is just as likely that Plutarch already had the material on hand before such requests came to his address. Scholars have argued, moreover, that Plutarch himself also had access to other people’s archives and libraries. See J. Sirinelli, 2000, p. 283: “Plutarque as soud doute beaucoup travaillé sur des notes ou des documents qu’on lui avait préparés.” According to R.H. Barrow, 1967, p. 152, Plutarch perhaps even contacted his Roman friends for information via letters, just as Paccius does in the introduction to *De tranquillitate animi*. Such a request is, indeed, found in the introduction to *De E*, albeit in an address to Plutarch’s Athenian comrad Sarapion (384E): ὡς δ’ ὅσον ἔλευθεριότητι καὶ κάλλει τὰ χρηματικὰ δόρα λειτεται τῶν ἀπὸ λόγου καὶ σοφίας, <α> καὶ διδόναι καλόν ἔστι καὶ διδόντας ἀντανακλῆν ἄμοιν παρὰ τῶν λαμβανόντων. ἐγώ γοῦν πρὸς σέ καὶ διὰ σοῦ τοῖς αὐτοῦ φίλοις τῶν Πυθικῶν λόγων ἐνίους ἄστερα ἀπαρχὰς ἀποστέλλων ἡμιλητὸν προσδόκων ἑτέρους καὶ πλείονας καὶ βελτίωνοι παρ᾽ ὑμῶν, ἅτε δὴ καὶ πόλει χρωμένων μεγάλη καὶ σχολῆς μάλλον ἐν βιβλίοις πολλοῖς καὶ παντοδαπαῖς διατριβαῖς εὐποροῦντων. The circulation of knowledge in this way (i.e. in the form of problems, notes, excerpts etc.) was in fact very customary among intellectuals in Plutarch’s time, which certainly testifies to a high degree of intellectual freedom and promiscuity. See, e.g., E. Lao, 2008, p. 36 (with a discussion of Pliny, *Ep*. 3. 5. 17).

Graecae and the lost barbaricae\textsuperscript{135}. If it is true, however, that Plutarch is referring to his aetiological writings in a more generic way, it is not unlikely that the reference also covers his other collections of Αἰτίαι, thus including *Quaestiones naturales*\textsuperscript{136} [see 1.1.4., n. 91].

Interestingly, on the basis of these two self-references in the *Vitae* Boulogne designated Plutarch’s *Quaestiones Romanae* to be an autonomous ‘work of reference’\textsuperscript{137}, that is, so I take it, a depository of specialised antiquarian inquiries that is worth referring to whenever suitable. In line with Boulogne, I believe that *Quaestiones naturales* can be considered a ‘work of reference’ also. Indeed, the aetiologies in *Quaestiones naturales* are often more detailed than in their parallel accounts [see 2.1.2.]. Moreover, in *Lys.* 12, 7, Plutarch concludes the digression on the meteorite that fell in Aeospotami by referring the interested reader to the γένος γραφῆς of *Quaestiones naturales*, if it is not simply this work that Plutarch had in mind [see 2.1.4.]. Of course, Boulogne’s designation of collections of *quaestiones* as ‘reference works’ should not be understood in a modern sense (i.e. as systematic encyclopaedias, handbooks, manuals or the like). In the end, there is no clear structure to these collections nor a table of contents, by the use of which material can be easily traced in the collection. By contrast, it seems that these collections provide a more general ‘frame of reference’, that is, a general explanatory framework in accordance with which problems could be properly solved.

As we will see in the next chapter, this ‘referential framework’ proves specifically useful for didactic purposes [see 3.2.1.]. Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* could be consulted and used by the reader to retrieve clearly shaped but roughly finished information whenever this was needed. It is perhaps not inappropriate, therefore, to consider the genre of problems as an integral part of ancient ‘functional literature’ (*Gebrachsliteratur*, *letteratura di consumo*)\textsuperscript{138}. The aspect of utilisation and consumption


\textsuperscript{136} If the reference is, indeed, a generic one, this may explain the neutral form ἐν τοῖς Αἰτίαις – perhaps to be emended in the feminine ἐν ταῖς Αἰτίαις [see 1.1.6., n. 146]?


\textsuperscript{138} See the contributions in O. Pecere and A. Stramaglia, 1996. J. Opsomer, 2010, p. 95 suggests (somewhat hesitantly) to speak of the implied reader in Plutarch’s *quaestiones* as “un ‘utilisateur’, en présupposant un contexte didactique”. Cf. also p. 115: “Le lecteur –
of ancient problem literature can, indeed, be illustrated from several papyri that were edited in the question-and-answer format, some of which contain extracts from Plutarch’s *quaestiones*.

The existence of these papyrological sources, the origin of which is generally linked to the context of schooling, at least testifies to the importance of question-and-answer literature in ancient education. Arguably, the kind of theories, concepts and argumentative turns Plutarch uses in his collections of *quaestiones* could be reused and remoulded in new discussions concerning similar problems in any given situation (for instance during symposia, as described in *Quaestiones convivales*). As such, one could even compare these collections of *quaestiones* to, say, instruction manuals, atlases, books of recipes, or other kinds of ‘open source’ literature, that is, literature that is ‘open’ for free use and re-use by the reader. By its interrogative structure, the content of this kind of literature is, indeed, very dynamic, and the response triggered by it will differ from reader to reader in a considerably idiosyncratic fashion.

In conclusion, it is not unlikely that *Quaestiones naturales* did not remain locked up in Plutarch’s office, but that it was made accessible to interested readers, or that the Chaeronean at least envisaged to prepare it for publication at some point, presumably in an educational context. In light of the idea that Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* were probably made accessible to a group of interested readers that stood in close contact with Plutarch himself, Sirinelli has appropriately called the Chaeronean “un homme-ressource” (rather than that he was “un esprit véritablement encyclopédique”).

Regarding Plutarch’s transfer of knowledge in the problem format, Sirinelli’s conclusion is worth quoting in full:

“Plutarque a pu céder aux sollicitations de ses amis qui ont fait valoir l’intérêt que présenteraient ces collections [de problèmes] pour un..." 

139 Some papyrus fragments remain from *Quaestiones convivales* (PSI inv. 2055, PL III 543 A; see G. Messeri Savorelli and R. Pintaudi, 1997, pp. 174–177) and also (possibly) from *Quaestiones Graecae* (P. Oxy. 2688 and 2689; see W. Morel, 1969, p. 219). P. Oxy. 2744 (2nd century AD) contains Ps.-Arist./Alex. Aphr., *Suppl. probl. 2*, 156 (= Probl. ined. 2, 153) and attributes it to Aristotle’s *ἀπορήματα*. See S. Kapetanaki and R.W. Sharples, 2006, p. 231, n. 466. In addition, several fragments from a papyrus codex of Books two to five from Ps.-Plutarch’s/Aëtius’ *Placita* have also survived (P. Antinoopolis 85 and 213). See also more generally R. Cribiore, 2001, pp. 208–209 and 212. In addition, there is a Greek papyrus from the 1st century AD (P. Berol. inv. 9764), which mentions the ‘well-known study by problem’ (lines 17–18: ἐπὶ τὸν πολυθρύλητον τὸν προβληματικὸν [...] λόγον). See M.-H. Marganne, 1998, pp. 13–34.

public intéressé par les questions traitées; c’était du reste la mode des collections de citations, de pensées ou de faits marquants. [...] Ce n’était pas une tâche mineure et indigne d’un écrivain de qualité mais même, à une époque où les bibliothèques demeuraient rares, un instrument intellectuel très prisé. [...] Cette pratique prouve seulement une conception différente du métier et des devoirs d’écrivain et, dans le cas de Plutarque, nous éclaire un peu mieux sur ce qu’on attendait de lui, sur les sources du savoir à cette époque et ce qu’on entendait alors par la fonction de communication et d’information.”

Now that we have considered the publishable character of Plutarch’s collections of quaestiones and their general usability as school texts, I will shortly reflect on their actual method of storage, with specific attention to aspects of thematic classification and overlap. Further indications of Plutarch’s school context in Quaestiones naturales will be discussed in the next chapter [see 3.1.].

2. Classification and overlap

Jacob identified the genre of problems with sets of index cards (“fiches”), which are further categorised into thematic folders (“dossiers de travail”)

Even though, nothing is known with any certainty about the actual form and organisation of Plutarch’s archive, scholars have often also conceived of it in a very concrete, physical way, imagining it as some sort of a systematised card-index box. In a very similar way, Plutarch’s collections of quaestiones serve as a discursive medium for the storage of several kinds of inquiries. They provide an accumulative textual format for the author’s progressive research, where new problems and answers could always be added or older ones revised. The thematic categorisation of Plutarch’s collections of quaestiones, by distinguishing several subsections (viz. antiquarian, scientific, literary, philosophical etc.), certainly improved their efficient usability, even if they are not catalogued in a fully

141 J. Sirinelli, 2000, p. 365.
142 C. Jacob, 2004, pp. 43–44 (with K. Oikonomopoulou, 2013a, p. 134). Jacob also points out that these problems are no simple notes because of their coherent language and style. Furthermore, in regards to the composition of Quaestiones convivales, J. Sirinelli, 2000, p. 386, n. 1 notes: “Il serait passionnant de pouvoir déceler dans les Propos de table tels qu’ils se présentent aujourd’hui les traces d’un classement des archives de Plutarque. On sent parfois dans telle ou telle séquence de plusieurs dîners, enjambant même la division en livres […], un air de parenté qui suppose une classification originelle par thèmes et non par convives.”
systematic fashion [see 1.1.4.]. Yet, at the same time, the technique of thematic categorisation seems to have had specific disadvantages, since on certain occasions, there may have been difficulties in classification.

Take, for instance, *Quaest. Plat.* 7, 1004D–1006B, which deals with the mechanism of ἀντιπερίστασις and its operation in several natural phenomena as discussed in *Tim.* 79e–80c. Plutarch chose to classify this problem with *Quaestiones Platonicae*, considering the close link with Plato’s text. But because of its focus on physics and natural phenomena, it would perhaps not have been out of place in *Quaestiones naturales* either. There is, in fact, a close parallel on magnetism between *Quaest. Plat.* 1005BD and *Q.N.* 19, 916D (ἐν κύκλῳ περιιών ~ περιέλευσις), and the theory of ἀντιπερίστασις also recurs in *Q.N.* 13, 915B (moreover, Plato is quoted in *Q.N.* 1, 911D and 5, 913CD [see 4.2.1.1.]). I believe that this type of thematic overlap contributes to a sense of mutual coherence between Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* more generally, which is also seen at work elsewhere.

Notably, there is also room for physical aetiology in *Quaestiones Romanae*\(^{146}\), and the same is obviously true for the Αἰτίαι τῶν Αράτου Διοσημιῶν (frs. 13–20 Sandbach). Another interesting example can be found in *Quaest. Graec.* 7, 292CD, which deals with the so-called floating clouds. The link with Greek culture is not very clear in this chapter. In fact, it is rather problematic. Perhaps this chapter ended up in the wrong folder in Plutarch’s archive by mistake. According to Halliday, “Plutarch would more tidily have placed [this ‘alien’] among his *Aetia Physica*.\(^{147}\) This is certainly supported by the fact that Plutarch quotes from the fourth Book of Theophrastus’ *Meteorology* (192 FHSG). The wrong (re?)location of this problem can perhaps speak to the practical, but at times, indeed, hasty and messy, use and consultation of Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* (perhaps by his students?). However, at a more conceptual level, it is not unlikely that these examples rather demonstrate how physical aetiology is an important unifying factor that effectively contributes to the general coherence of Plutarch’s corpus of *quaestiones*, and hence of his oeuvre more generally\(^{148}\) [see 2.1.2.].

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\(^{144}\) See J. Opsomer, 1999 [see 4.3.1.2., n. 176].

\(^{145}\) Cf. K. Oikonomopoulou, 2013a, p. 144.


\(^{147}\) W.R. Halliday, 1928, p. 14. Other physical material is found in *Quaest. Graec.* 10, 293A (on the small plant called ‘sheep-escaper’) and to a lesser degree 9, 292E (on the month called ‘Bysios’, wrongfully associated with the word φύσις, ‘growth’).

\(^{148}\) Cf., e.g., C. Darbo-Peschanski, 1998, p. 28 for the ‘cosmological’ connection
Of course, physical aetiology is not the only unifying factor. Also the other way around, a number of chapters treated in *Quaestiones naturales* express a sensitivity for cultural-antiquarian inquiry, which reminds the reader of the problems treated in *Quaestiones Graecae*. This is the case, for instance, in *Q.N.* 10, 914D, where Plutarch refers in parenthesis to a story told about the people of Halieis, who received an oracle instructing them to dip Dionysus in the sea. Similarly, in *Q.N.* 14, 915C, Plutarch wonders why the people of Doris pray for a bad harvest of hay. And in *Q.N.* 23, 917F, he explains why people do not hunt in the vicinity of Mt. Etna in Sicily. Moreover, the method of incorporation of quotations from the poets, such as Homer or Aratus, is reminiscent of the exegetical-aetiological approach known from Plutarch’s fragmentary Ὀμηρικαὶ μελέται and Αἴτια τῶν Ἀράτου Διοσημιῶν (Homer is quoted in *Q.N.* 5, 913D, 19, 916B, 20, 917A, 21, 917D, 34 and Aratus in *Q.N.* 2, 912D [see 4.1.2.3.])149. Arguably, these overlaps do not only testify to the, at times, very close affiliation between the different research projects in Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones*, but also reveal the openness and all-round applicability of many kinds of knowledge to different contexts – a dynamic that lies at the heart of Plutarch’s πολυμάθεια project150.

### 3. Conclusion and new questions

In conclusion, Plutarch’s interest in natural problems is an important unifying factor throughout his entire oeuvre, both in the *Vitae* and the *Moralia*. The collection of *Quaestiones naturales* holds an important position in this regard, because Plutarch there aims to treat such problems mostly on their own terms. As such, the collection provides an independent textual medium that allows for Plutarch to autonomously store and retrieve the results of his research on specific natural scientific topics. He could refer the interested reader to this work whenever necessary, making it a work that was certainly publishable. From the perspective of composition, *Quaestiones naturales* oscillates between simple notes and between *Quaestiones Romanae/Graecae* and the *Vitae*: “Les Αἴτια ne seraient donc pas un simple recueil de curiosités sur lesquelles un esprit érudit s’exercerait à des tentatives d’explication pour le plaisir de spéculer. Ils semblent s’inscrire dans la logique des œuvres jugées les plus importantes de Plutarque et, comme les *Vies* ou les traités physiques, mettre au centre de leur propos la rationalité du devenir et du cosmos ainsi que les limites de la connaissance qu’on peut avoir de celle-ci.”

149 Notably, Plutarch’s collection of Ὀμηρικαὶ μελέται (from which only frs. 122–127 Sandbach remain) also had specific physical interests: fr. 127 Sandbach concerns the atmospheric influence on the consistency of the shoots of plants.

150 Indeed, the aspect of diversity (πολυμαθία), as a typical feature of Hellenistic poetics, is brought to a climax in the miscellaneous *Quaestiones convivales*. See I. Gallo and C. Moreschini, 2000, pp. 14–15.
a fully elaborated treatise. The relationship with *Quaestiones convivales* is important, because both works are closely related from a text genetic perspective, probably being based on the same and similar hypomnemematic material. It remains to be seen, however, to which degree Plutarch’s intentions with these two works coincide in terms of their educational goals. New questions emerge, especially concerning the concrete reading of *Quaestiones naturales* (vis-à-vis *Quaestiones convivales*). Who are the intended readers of Plutarch’s natural problems? What is their function and how do they relate to Plutarch’s overarching educational project? These questions will demand a closer examination of the socio-cultural and intellectual-philosophical context from which Plutarch’s natural problems emerge. These and related issues will be treated in the following chapter.