Plutarch's Science of Natural Problems

Meeusen, Michiel

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Synopsis

By way of conclusion, I here provide a synopsis of the main arguments as elaborated in the four introductory essays that form the first part of this book. I hope to have shown that Plutarch’s *Quaestiones naturales* demonstrate that, among many other intellectual and philosophical predilections, the Chaeronean had numerous particular – and at times rather peculiar – questions about the natural world on his mind and took them to heart. By providing a systematic study and commentary of this generally neglected work in light of Plutarch’s natural scientific programme more generally the volume at hand is meant to usefully contribute to our understanding of Plutarch’s world view and, thus, to our knowledge of ancient natural science in the Imperial Era more generally.

The first chapter provides a general outline of the Aristotelian genre of natural problems and the place of Plutarch in the wider tradition of the Ps.-Aristotelian *Problems*. A seminal point that is raised here and serves as a conceptual framework for the study as a whole is that Plutarch’s natural problems have an obvious Aristotelian, or more generally Peripatetic, character, which is problematic in light of his philosophical allegiance to Plato and the Academy. A good understanding of Plutarch’s natural problems proves to be indispensable for contemporary scholarship not only because it provides precious insight into the reception of Ps.-Aristotle’s *Problems* in the Imperial Era, but also because it sheds an important light on the Stagirite’s influence on Plutarch’s philosophy, a problem that is settled only at the end of chapter four (see below). Against this backdrop, the first chapter examines the ‘problematic’ organisation of *Quaestiones naturales* both on a micro- and on a macrostructural level. As indicated by its original Greek title, the aspect of physical aetiology is central to the collection’s scientific set-up, which explains the sub-literary style of discourse and the general avoidance of moralising dynamics. This type of discourse is characteristic of the Aristotelian genre of natural problems more generally, which served as Plutarch’s model. It is not strictly representative of the author’s scientific intentions, since Plutarch’s concept of natural science is by no means reducible to these features. This raises questions about the position of *Quaestiones naturales* in relation to the *corpus Plutarchaeum* more generally.

The second chapter further elaborates on this topic. Special attention there goes to the incorporation of the same and similar *Quaestiones naturales* material in Plutarch’s other treatises, especially *Quaestiones convivales*. We have seen that Plutarch’s collections of problems should not be mistaken for his personal notes (ὑπομνήματα), as traditional
scholarship has often done. By contrast, *Quaestiones naturales* provides an independent aetiological framework for Plutarch to collect his thoughts on particular natural questions and to deal with them in an autonomous fashion (i.e. to a large degree on their own terms and free from any other preoccupations, such as stylistic embellishment or moralising dynamics). Eventually, the possibility of the collection’s publication by Plutarch himself is considered, where the usability of this kind of literature in a philosophical school context is emphasised.

This last point is further elaborated upon in **chapter three**, which addresses the intended reading and educational value of *Quaestiones naturales*. I here show that natural problems were a popular subject for discussion in Plutarch’s philosophical school and also during convivial gatherings of his intellectual milieu. In a seminal passage from *De tuenda* 133E, natural problems are described as being ἐλαφρὰ καὶ πιθανά (‘easy and persuasive’), a phrase that highlights the low level of complexity of the genre and its general utility as exercises in natural scientific debate. Thus, I elaborate on the idea of intellectual gymnastics promoted by Plutarch’s natural problems, while also stressing that the solutions to these problems are not simply meant as forms of sophistic playfulness. On the contrary, the search for physical causes in explaining wonder-inducing natural phenomena can be seen as an intellectual exercise aimed at the eradication of irrational, superstitious beliefs about God and his influence in the natural world around us – an idea that ties closely with Plutarch’s broader philosophical-religious project.

The place of Plutarch’s *Quaestiones naturales* in this broader philosophical-religious project is further elaborated upon in **chapter four**. Here, I first focus on the collection’s aetiological design and its link with the ancient genre of paradoxography and *mirabilia* literature. Plutarch was not so much concerned – for underlying philosophical and religious motives – with the veracity of the natural phenomena but with their physical causes. An explanation is found in Plutarch’s Platonic-Academic outlook on the world and his dualistic view on causality, wherein it is accepted that natural phenomena are based on physical causes but also have a higher, divine motivation. In order to support this, I provide an analysis and interpretation of the mythological material that Plutarch incorporates in his physical aetiologies, arguing that these may hint at a higher type of causality and at a ‘mystification’ of the aetiological discourse. An analysis of the material Plutarch borrows from the poets and from authors of scientific prose then follows. We see that in his attempt to formulate plausible explanations to the problems, Plutarch often relies on received knowledge by ‘problematising’, that is, reframing in the problem format, a wide array of ancient Greek scientific learning. At the same time, he tries to balance this approach with his own innovative contributions to the problems, thus demonstrating his own argumentative creativity. In
the remainder of the chapter, I provide a general outline of Plutarch’s scientific methodology, focusing successively on the material principles and natural processes mentioned in the physical aetiologies, Plutarch’s generally sceptical and anti-empiricist approach to natural phenomena, the logical-rhetorical organisation of the collection and the use of a more or less uniform set of technical terms. At the end of chapter four, I revisit the question of Aristotle’s influence on Plutarch’s Platonism, arguing that *Quaestiones naturales* is not the product of his aspirations to be regarded as an Aristotelian scientist. In the end, Plutarch’s science of natural problems is, by its inquisitive method and philosophical purpose, framed in a wider Platonic view of the world.