

Crossing Borders

Aetiological Overlap in Plutarch's Collections of Questions

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1 Aetiology in Plutarch

Aetiological research is an important aspect of Plutarch's writings and plays a significant discursive role throughout the *Vitae* and the *Moralia*.^{*} Plutarch (ca. 45–120 CE) sought explanations for a wide range of topics, not just restricting his research to cultural and historical questions but also paying attention to, amongst others, literary, linguistic, philosophical, and scientific ones. As this chapter will try to show, his aetiological research and the explanatory techniques that it involves are not only intended to demonstrate the author's manifold learning (*πολυμάθεια*) to his reader, but also – if not primarily – to support and propagate an underlying philosophical agenda. This is not surprising, since besides being one of the most renowned intellectuals of his time, Plutarch was famous for his avid adherence to Plato and the Academy. In his case, aetiology thus goes beyond anchoring past in present or legitimizing current states of affairs by inventing past events *ex post facto*. His primary aim is philosophical, in that he is in search of the most fundamental causes of things. If any anchoring is involved here, it will consist in finding a firm aetiological footing for these things in the framework of a Platonic worldview. It needs no illustration that Plutarch's concept of the truth and his search for it is, indeed, essentially inspired by Platonic philosophy.¹

Plutarch composed a significant number of aetiological collections, several of which are still extant today, while others are now lost or partially preserved in fragmentary form. The *Lamprias Catalogue*, an ancient list of works ascribed to Plutarch supposedly compiled by his son Lamprias, mentions nine works concerning *αἰτίαι*. It is not always clear which precise topics these titles may have dealt with, but the surviving material suggests that they were all in question and answer form:

^{*} I am grateful to Michael Trapp for correcting linguistic weaknesses of an earlier draft of this chapter.

¹ See Opsomer 1998.

1. *Explanations of Aratus' Weatherlore* (nr. 119: Αἰτίαι τῶν Ἀράτου Διοσημιῶν = frgg. 13–20 Sandbach),
2. *Roman Customs Explained* (nr. 138: Αἰτίαι Ρωμαϊκῆί = *Quaestiones Romanae*),
3. *Foreign Customs Explained* (nr. 139: Αἰτίαι βαρβαρικῆί),
4. *Explanations of Current Stoic Doctrines* (nr. 149: Αἰτίαι τῶν περιφερομένων Στωικῶν),²
5. *Explanations and Topics* (nr. 160: Αἰτίαι καὶ τόποι),
6. *Explanations of Exchanges* (nr. 161: Αἰτίαι ἀλλαγῶν),
7. *Greek Customs Explained* (nr. 166: Αἰτίαι Ἑλλήνων = *Quaestiones Graecae*),
8. *Explanations concerning Women* (nr. 167: Αἰτίαι γυναικῶν),³
9. *Explanations of Natural Phenomena* (nr. 218: Αἰτίαι φυσικῆί = *Quaestiones naturales*).

The chapter at hand will be concerned mainly with the last of these works, the *Quaestiones naturales*, on the basis of which we aim to draw important inferences for Plutarch's aetiological project more generally. The work is still extant, albeit in a battered form. Including the additional chapters from Gybertus Longolius' 1542 Latin translation (*Quaestiones naturales* 32–39) and from Michael Psellus' *De omnifaria doctrina* (*Quaestiones naturales* 40–41 = §§ 170 and 188 Westerink), the collection consists of 41 problems that straddle a variety of questions pertaining to the broad field of ancient Greek 'physics', including inquiries into ancient zoology, botany, meteorology and their sub-disciplines. Finding its model in the Aristotelian *Problemata physica* (*Natural Problems*), which circulated widely in intellectual milieus in Plutarch's time, the collection specifically inquires into the physical – that is material and instrumental – causes of individual natural phenomena. The questions are typically introduced with 'Why?' (διὰ τί;) and are followed by a number of explanations, which themselves are phrased interrogatively, in the form of a compound question: 'Is it because X? Or because Y? Or Z?' (πότερον ...; ἢ ...; ἢ ...). In line with its Aristotelian model, the types of problems Plutarch tries to solve concern very particular, and at times rather peculiar, topics: for instance, 'Why does seawater not provide nourishment to trees?' (*Quaestiones naturales* 1, 91c); 'Why is rain that accompanies thunder and lightning more fertilising for seeds?' (*Quaestiones naturales* 4, 91f); 'Why does the octopus change its colour?' (*Quaestiones naturales* 19, 91b); 'Why do the tears of boars taste

2 Sandbach 1969, 22, n. 1 suggests reading ἱστοριῶν instead of Στωικῶν.

3 Nachstädt (in Nachstädt, Sieveking and Titchener 1935, 225) suggests that the title is corrupt and should be Ἀρεταὶ γυναικῶν, thus identifying it with the Γυναικῶν ἀρεταὶ listed as no. 126 (= *Mulierum virtutes*).

sweet, while those of deer taste salty and ordinary?' (*Quaestiones naturales* 20, 916f); 'Why are bees quicker to sting people who have just committed adultery?' (*Quaestiones naturales* 36); etc.

By their explorative approach and interrogative formulation of the proposed *Mehrfacherklärungen* (πότερον ...; ἤ ...; ἢ ...), the natural problems at hand remain fundamentally unsolved. It is precisely through this aporetic and anti-dogmatic attitude on the author's side that room is left for further research and that final judgement is postponed.⁴ The same approach is found in the Aristotelian *Problemata physica*. What seems to be very different between Plutarch's natural problems and those ascribed to Aristotle, however, is the epistemological foundation on which their natural scientific research is based. Plutarch postpones final judgement, since he, in line with Platonic-Academic theory, refuses to put much confidence in knowledge deriving from sensory data, whereas Aristotle's avoidance of argumentative conclusiveness was more practically motivated, aiming to foster further research and debate on specific scientific topics in the Lyceum context. In the end, Aristotle put much more trust in the feasibility of natural science than Plutarch as a Platonist ever did. The same dubitative stance can be traced in his other thematic collections of *quaestiones*, where it is applied to other topics (especially the *Quaestiones Romanae, Platonicae* and *convivales*).

Plutarch discusses natural problems throughout his entire oeuvre. In his *Quaestiones convivales* around one third of the questions deal with natural scientific topics. Plutarch there cross-fertilises the question and answer format with the literary genre of the symposium: each symposiast contributes to the debate by formulating plausible explanations much in the same way as is seen in a more condensed form in the *Quaestiones naturales*. In the *Vitae*, Plutarch sporadically incorporates natural scientific 'digressions' (παρεκβάσεις) in his biographical narratives, a similar procedure as seen in the opening of some of his dialogues.⁵ By transgressing the textual boundaries between several of Plutarch's writings, these scientific materials testify to the adaptable and versatile nature of this type of knowledge, as being applicable to very different literary contexts. Plutarch uses the natural problem format in its traditional, Aristotelian form only in the *Quaestiones naturales*, where he treats such problems in an autonomous fashion, thus creating an independent textual medium that allows for a separate collection of the results of his research on particular natural scientific topics. Even though the direct literary contexts of his natural

4 This feature ties in closely with the author's Sceptical-Academic position in natural scientific research. Compare the ἐποχή statement at the end of *De primo frigido*, 955c.

5 See *De Pythiae oraculis* 395a–396c and *De defectu oraculorum* 410b–411d.

problems can, thus, clearly differ between the distinct ‘genres’ in which they are integrated, the problems themselves generally share a consistent approach to dealing with natural phenomena by finding their model in the Aristotelian *Problemata physica*.

What we learn from this is that physical aetiology in particular (among several other types of aetiology) plays an important unifying role throughout Plutarch’s entire oeuvre.⁶ The aim of this chapter is to corroborate this view for Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* as a distinct genre of writing (viz. in the *Quaestiones Platonicae, Graecae, Romanae* and *convivales*). Conversely, I will examine how the *Quaestiones naturales* tie in with Plutarch’s aetiological programme more generally. To this end, I will argue that the different strands of aetiology present in this work (not only physical aetiology) testify to the, at times, very close affiliation with his other aetiological writings, including technical-philosophical, literary-exegetical and cultural-historical collections. By providing an analysis of the conceptual overlaps with these works, I will try to demonstrate that this phenomenon of aetiological blending reveals the openness and all-round applicability of many kinds of knowledge to different contexts; afterwards I will turn to the underlying philosophy of these writings. The aspect of overlap applies both to the research techniques and to the research contents of Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones*: accordingly, in what follows the overlap between aetiological and exegetical techniques, and between physical and cultural contents, will successively concern us.

2 Classification and Overlap

In antiquity – and much later – the genre of problems (commonly denominated as *προβλήματα, ζητήματα, ἀπορήματα, ἀπορίαι, αἰτίαι*, etc.) provided a useful tool for questioning all kinds of topics, not only in the field of natural science but also, amongst others, those of medicine, philosophy, theology, mechanics, history and literature. The question and answer approach has a clearly educational purpose, in that the discursive relation between author and reader often resembles that of a teacher and his student (presumably, the Aristotelian *Problemata* themselves reflect the style of debate in the Lyceum during Aristotle’s life and especially after his death).⁷ By its piecemeal structure, the genre of problems serves as a useful mnemonic device aimed at

⁶ On the issues of unity and consistency in the *corpus Plutarcheum*, see Barthelmess 1986, 62–64 and the contributions in Nikolaidis 2008 and Opsomer, Roskam and Titchener 2016.

⁷ See Mayhew 2015, vii.

fixating knowledge in a clearly structured way, where questions and answers are recorded in a tight repetitive sequence.

In his contribution on the “archéologie” of the genre of problems, Christian Jacob at one point identifies problems very concretely with sets of index cards (“fiches”), which are further categorised into thematic folders (“dossiers de travail”).⁸ Scholars have also conceived of Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* in this way, imagining them as some sort of systematised card-index boxes.⁹ However, nothing is known with any certainty about the actual form in which these writings were composed: in fact, due to the often miscellaneous style in which they came down to us there is not much obvious organisation to them. Still, Plutarch’s collections of *quaestiones* function as a convenient medium for the efficient storage and retrieval of several kinds of inquiries, thus serving as some kind of an intellectual archive. 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 sub-sections (viz. cultural, historical, scientific, literary, philosophical etc.), certainly improved their efficient usability, even if they are not catalogued in a fully systematic fashion. 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, *Quaestiones Platonicae* 7, 1004d–1006b, which deals with the mechanism of ‘cyclical replacement of motion’ (ἀντιπερίστασιν τῆς κινήσεως) and its operation in several natural phenomena, including magnetic attraction, as discussed in Plato’s *Timaeus* 79e–80c.¹⁰ There is no reason to go into the details of this passage here. Presumably, the reason why Plutarch chose to classify this problem with *Quaestiones Platonicae* is that there is a close link with Plato’s text. But because of its focus on natural phenomena and physical aetiology, it would not have been out of place in *Quaestiones naturales* either.¹¹ There is, in fact, a close parallel concerning the aetiology of magnetism between *Quaestiones Platonicae* 7, 1005b–d and *Quaestiones naturales* 19, 916d, where Plutarch (in the context of the octopus’ ability to change colour)

8 Jacob 2004, 43sq. (with Oikonomopoulou 2013, 134).

9 One should not, however, confuse Plutarch’s collections of problems with the notes (ὑπομνήματα) he says that he drafted for personal use (*De tranquillitate animi* 464f). See Meeusen 2012. See already Gudeman 1927, col. 2526, who speaks of “Zettelkasten”. See also Dorandi 2000 more generally. On ancient conceptions of memory in itself as an ‘archive’, see Small 1997, 81–137, 224–239.

10 On the concept of ἀντιπερίστασις, see Opsomer 1999.

11 Cf. Oikonomopoulou 2013, 144.

mentions that some people assume the mechanism of cyclical motion of particles to be the explanatory principle.¹² This point is not further elaborated upon, though, and is only mentioned in order to illustrate Empedocles' emanation theory, to which Plutarch alluded previously (the main point is that these emanations settle into the pores of the octopus and change its colour when they contract due to fear).

But why exactly did Plutarch choose to incorporate this chapter about cyclical movement in the *Quaestiones Platonicae* and not in the *Quaestiones naturales*? The answer to this question is probably genre related. The *Quaestiones Platonicae* do not, in fact, belong to the genre of αἰτίαι but of ζητήματα, and therefore have a different function (its Greek title is Πλατωνικὰ ζητήματα = *Lampr. Cat.* nr. 136). Scholars have pointed out that Plutarch's use of the concept of ζήτημα often has an exegetical connotation, in that it mostly concerns the elucidation and interpretation of particular enigmatic passages in a given philosophical or poetic text.¹³ By contrast, in his aetiological writings Plutarch is in search of the underlying causes of natural phenomena, the origins of specific cultural traditions etc., by means of plausible explanations: these problems mostly concern more general intellectual topics, so that the strict connection with a text is absent. This is not, of course, to deny that Plutarch often relies on written sources in his aetiological writings (in the *Quaestiones naturales* he quotes from a wide range of philosophers, poets, doctors, etc. – including Plato himself),¹⁴ nor does it imply that there is full consistency in Plutarch's own wording (at least in some cases the nuances in semantics seem completely artificial).¹⁵ What is more important, though, is that the mainly exegetical character of the genre of ζήτηματα does not devalue its philosophical interest for Plutarch. This is true at least for the *Quaestiones Platonicae*, because, for Plutarch, a correct understanding of Plato's texts would enable him to grasp the philosophical truth that they contained.¹⁶ As I will argue further on, a similar philosophical dynamic lies at the heart of Plutarch's

12 There is a clear verbal reminiscence in the phrases ἐν κύκλῳ περιιών and περιελεύσεις (Doehner 1858 falsely proposes περιελάσεις).

13 Cf. *Quaestiones Platonicae* 8, 1006f: τοῦτο μὲν οὖν τοιαύτην ἔχει τὴν ἐξήγησιν. Cf. also *De tranquillitate animi*, 464e: περὶ τῶν ἐν Τιμαίῳ δεομένων ἐπιμελεστέρως ἐξηγήσεως. See Dörrie 1959, 2 and Opsomer 1996, 72.

14 This is the case in *Quaestiones naturales* 1, 911d and in *Quaestiones naturales* 5, 913c–d. In these passages, the Plato quotes support Plutarch's main arguments rather than the other way around.

15 E.g. regarding Plutarch's use of ζήτημα in *Quaestiones convivales*, cf. Harrison 2000, 196 ("The terms ζήτημα and πρόβλημα would appear to be interchangeable in this work since no pattern is detectable").

16 Cf. Opsomer 1996, 74.

aetiological writings, implying that the same goal is aimed at, albeit by different means.

3 Aetiological and Zetematic Overlap

In light of the technique of Plutarchan aetiology, and of ancient aetiology more generally, one may wonder how strict the distinction from a zetematic approach really is (or needs to be). Indeed, the two types of inquiry do not strictly exclude one another: for instance, the eight fragments that remain from Plutarch's *Αἰτίαι τῶν Ἀράτου Διοσημιῶν*, or *Explanations of Aratus' Weatherlore* (frgg. 13–20 Sandbach; *Lampr. Cat.* nr. 119), combine an aetiological and a zetematic approach, where it is Plutarch's aim to provide an interpretation of Aratus' verses by explaining the atmospheric phenomena at issue, mostly concerning weather predictions. The same exegetical-aetiological strategy applies to the Aratus quote in *Quaestiones naturales* 2, 912d. This passage mentions that frogs croak more loudly and clearly out of joy when they expect rain, because it sweetens the water of the pond. Plutarch's main point is that this sweet constituent in rainwater makes it more fertilising for plants than irrigation water – which is the principal problem at hand (Διὰ τί μᾶλλον ὑπὸ τῶν ὑετίων ἢ τῶν ἐπιρρύτων ὑδάτων τὰ δένδρα καὶ τὰ σπέρματα πέφυκε τρέφεσθαι; 911f). He quotes Aratus (*Diosemia* 214–215 = *Phaenomena* 946–947) to back up the point about frogs, but the backing up itself is not interpretation-free, since the lines are taken to imply that there is a causal connection between the sweetness of rainwater and the joy of frogs (912c–d):

ἔν γὰρ καὶ τοῦτο ποιεῖται σημεῖον ὑετοῦ μέλλοντος Ἄρατος εἰπὼν ἡ μάλα δείλαιαι γενεαί, ὕδροισιν ὄνειρα, / αὐτόθεν ἐκ λίμνης πατέρες βοῶσι γυρίνων.'

This one point Aratus also makes into a sign of impending rain saying: 'straight from the pond, the tadpoles' fathers cry: truly wretched race, the victuals of water snakes'.

A similar exegetical-aetiological technique is applied to the verses of other poets, most notably Homer, who is quoted no less than five times throughout the *Quaestiones naturales*: viz. in *Quaestiones naturales* 5, 913d (concerning the nature of salt taste: *Od.* 5.322–323), 19, 916b (concerning colour change in cowardly people: *Il.* 13.279), 20, 917a (concerning the fiery temperament of wild boars: *Od.* 19.446), 21, 917d (concerning the Homeric noun *χλούνης*, used of boars with one testicle only: *Il.* 9.539), and 34 (concerning the swiftness

of the west wind: *Il.* 19.415–416). The style of these passages is reminiscent of Plutarch's Ὀμηρικὰ μελέται, or *Homeric Studies*, originally in four books, from which only few fragments remain (frgg. 122–127 Sandbach; *Lampyr. Cat.* nr. 42). That this work must have had a specific interest in physical aetiology is shown by fr. 127 Sandbach, which concerns atmospheric influence on the consistency of the shoots of plants.¹⁷ In another context, viz. regarding the problem of why people use fresh water rather than seawater to wash clothes, Plutarch quotes from Odysseus' encounter with Nausicaä after his shipwreck (*Od.* 6.137, 218–219, 226). He notes that Homer, in describing how Odysseus warns the maidens to stay away and goes to the river to clean off the briny scum from his skin, is, in fact, a sensitive observer of natural phenomena (ὑπερφυῶς τοῦ ποιητοῦ τὸ γινόμενον συνεωρακότος κτλ., 'the Poet sensitively observes what is happening', *Quaestiones convivales* 1.9, 627e).¹⁸ The quote is meant to underpin the argument that the finest and lightest constituent in seawater dries quickest, leaving behind a briny scum, which can be washed away with fresh drinking water.

What this amounts to is that Barrow's "rough and ready rule", according to which citations in Plutarch's *Moralia* are only recorded for the purpose of superfluous illustration – in the sense that they do not contribute to the main arguments as such – does not seem to be apposite.¹⁹ Plutarch's citations from the poets do directly contribute to the aetiologies at hand, but at the same time this invokes an exegetical method: in the end, it is not so much the verses themselves as Plutarch's interpretations of them that contribute to the main argument.²⁰

4 Physical and Cultural Overlap

Physical research is not the only strand of aetiology Plutarch uses in his *Quaestiones naturales*. Most notably, a number of chapters treated therein

17 Fragment quoted in a scholion on *Il.* 15.624.

18 Cf. also, e.g., *Quaestiones convivales* 7.1, 698d–f (Homer was the first to have observed, *συνεωρακέναι*, that the receptacle for our nourishment is the oesophagus, and for breath the windpipe). On physical allegory and scientific explanations in Heraclitus' contemporary *Quaestiones Homericæ*, cf. Russell and Konstan 2005, xxi–xxii.

19 Barrow 1967, 156. The same conclusion was reached for *Quaestiones Romanae* by Van der Stockt 1987, 291.

20 Plutarch also applies this strategy, for instance, to Heraclitus' famous river statement in *Quaestiones naturales* 2, 912a: 'you could not step into the same rivers twice, because other waters flow upon you'. He reinterprets this in a very literal, physical fashion in order to support the theory that river water has a fresh and new-born property. As such, the deeper and original ontological meaning of Heraclitus' saying is no longer relevant.

express a sensitivity for cultural inquiry. This type of questioning reminds the reader of the problems treated in the *Quaestiones Graecae* and *Romanae*. In those collections, Plutarch deals with a wide gamut of Greek and Roman cultural phenomena, mostly enigmatic customs and names, after the manner of Callimachus' *Aetia*, albeit in a prosaic question and answer format.²¹ This does not imply (as we will see) that there is no place at all for physical aetiology in these collections, but the main aetiological dynamic still consists of explaining cultural phenomena in terms of historical, political, anthropological and etymological categories.²² In what follows I will try to show that the technique of aetiological overlap, where natural and cultural topics are blended together, is symptomatic of the unity and coherence of the author's global research agenda.

In *Quaestiones naturales* 14, 915c, for instance, Plutarch wonders why the people of Doris, a small state located on the border between Thessaly and Boeotia, pray for a bad harvest of hay. What this paradoxical prayer implies, so we learn from the aetiology, is that a bad harvest of hay is connected with a good harvest of grain: hay is 'badly' harvested if it gets rained on because it putrefies, but rain is good for grain as protection against the hot southerly winds. In *Quaestiones naturales* 10, 914d, to give another example, Plutarch refers to a story told of the people of Halai, a deme located on the north-east coast of Attica. The people received an oracle instructing them to dip Dionysus in the sea (which may be a reference to the ritual submerging of the statue of Dionysus into the sea). This detail is added (in parenthesis) in order to illustrate the main problem, which is the question why people pour salt into wine: this is either because the heat of seawater is an aid against chilling of the wine, or because its earthy constituents help against unpleasant odours, putrefaction, or turbidity in the wine. In *Quaestiones naturales* 23, 917f, to give a final example, Plutarch explains why people do not hunt in the vicinity of Mt. Etna in Sicily. The reason is that a great amount of mountain violets grows there, the

21 Notably, Plutarch does not cite Callimachus' *Aetia* very frequently throughout his oeuvre: they are mentioned only once (in *Parallela Graeca et Romana* 315c–d: ὡς <Καλλίμαχος> ἐν δευτέρῳ Αἰτίων). For a collection of Callimachus passages in Plutarch, see Magnelli 2005, 218–220. Even so, Plutarch is well acquainted with aetiological literature more generally. For Plutarch's references to other aetiological authors, see *Amatorius* 761b (ὡς ἐν τοῖς Αἰτίοις Διονύσιος ὁ ποιητῆς ἰστόρησε) and *Rom.* 21.8 (Βούτας δὲ τις, αἰτίας μυθῶδεις ἐν ἐλεγείοις περὶ τῶν Ῥωμαϊκῶν ἀναγράφων). For aetiology in ancient literature more generally, see Harder 2012, vol. 1, 24–27 (esp. 26) and the contributions in Chassignet 2008 (esp. Schmidt's contribution on Plutarch's lost *Quaestiones Barbaricae*, 165–183).

22 For the different aetiological categories in *Quaestiones Romanae*, see Boulogne 1992. See also Payen 1998, 49–54, who argues for a coherent cultural landscape in both collections, based on geographical markers in the text.

sweet fragrance of which occupies the place and captures the exhalations from the animals. At the end of the aetiology Plutarch refers to the mythological abduction of Korè by Pluto. Pluto abducted Korè when she was picking flowers in that region: therefore, so Plutarch writes, people honour and worship the place as a sanctuary (ἄσυλον) and do not attack the animals that graze there.

Notably, also the other way around, Plutarch's interest in natural scientific matters can be found in the *Quaestiones Graecae* and *Romanae*. For instance, *Quaestiones Graecae* 7, 292c–d deals with the so-called 'floating clouds' (Τίνες αἱ πλωιᾶδες νεφέλαι); these, so Plutarch writes, are clouds that are most filled with rain and are in constant motion. Apart from its linguistic interest – a common feature of the *Quaestiones Graecae* – the link with Greek culture is not immediately obvious in this chapter. Therefore, Sir William Reginald Halliday in his 1928 commentary writes that "Plutarch would more tidily have placed [this 'alien'] among his *Aetia Physica*".²³ This is supported by the fact that Plutarch in this chapter quotes from the fourth book of Theophrastus' *Meteorology* (192 FHSG). The wrong location (or relocation?) 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*. However, at a more conceptual level, the chapter is not out of place (linguistics being a common topic in the collection) but rather demonstrates how natural scientific material effectively contributes to the general coherence of Plutarch's corpus of *quaestiones*, and hence of his oeuvre more generally. Other natural scientific material is found in *Quaestiones Graecae* 10, 293a (on the small plant called 'sheep-escaper') and in *Quaestiones Graecae* 9, 292e (on the month called 'Bysios', wrongfully associated with the word φύσιος, 'growth').

In the *Quaestiones Romanae*, the Roman counterpart of the *Quaestiones Graecae*, there is also room for a natural scientific type of discourse.²⁴ This has been analysed in detail by Jacques Boulogne, so only a few examples should suffice to illustrate it.²⁵ In the very first chapter of the collection, Plutarch

23 Halliday 1928, 14.

24 There are differences in the type and method of inquiry between both collections, however. In *Quaestiones Graecae* most of the questions are introduced with τί, τίς or τίνας (cf. *Quaestiones Graecae* 1–25, 29, 30, 32, 34, 38, 40, 44) and the answers are mostly formulated dogmatically instead of interrogatively. The introduction with διὰ τί is less frequent than in *Quaestiones Romanae*, but not absent (see *Quaestiones Graecae* 9b, 31, 36, 37, 39, 45–51, 53, 55, 58). Each problem in *Quaestiones Graecae* often receives only one clear-cut solution (or better: definition) rather than a number of successive explanations, as is the case in *Quaestiones Romanae*. See Preston 2001, 96, Boulogne 2002, 179sq. and Payen 2014, 246sq.

25 See Boulogne 1992, 4704–4706 and 2002, 98. Cf. *Quaestiones Romanae* 1, 263e; 2, 264b; 19, 268c–d; 24, 269c–d; 38, 273e; 77, 282c–d; 78, 282e–f; 101, 288b; 102, 288c; 106, 289c; 111, 290a–b.

wonders why the Romans order the bride to touch fire and water (Διὰ τί τὴν γαμουμένην ἄπτεσθαι πυρὸς καὶ ὕδατος κελεύουσι; *Quaestiones Romanae* 1, 263d–f; cf. *Ov. Fast.* 4.785–806). He gives four explanations. 1. The element of fire is masculine and water feminine: the first provides motion, the second matter; 2. Fire purifies and water cleanses, and the bride needs both qualities; 3. Fire and water complement each other, just as man and woman do when they are united by marriage; 4. The marital partners should not desert each other even if they only have fire and water to share with each other. Considering the frequency of passages relating to natural science in the *Quaestiones Romanae* and *Graecae*, scholars rightly speak of a ‘cosmic’ approach to cultural history by Plutarch. Catherine Darbo-Peschanski writes in this regard that:

Plutarque penserait donc une “cosmologie de l’histoire” comme prolongement et achèvement, sur le mode du redoublement analogique, de la cosmologie physique. [...] La conséquence en est qu’on peut s’interroger sur les causes (αἴτια) de ce que font et de ce que produisent historiquement les hommes comme on s’interroge sur les causes des phénomènes physiques.²⁶

As to the ‘cosmological’ backdrop in the *Quaestiones Romanae* and *Graecae*, she writes:

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 oeuvres 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.²⁷

The use of physical aetiology in the context of cultural-historical inquiries enables a more abstract, cosmological approach to the subject matter, as is confirmed by Plutarch himself in *Quaestiones Romanae* 106, 289b–c, regarding the problem of why the Romans revere Fortuna as ‘First Born’ (Πρῆμιγένειαν). There Plutarch explains, in the third and final explanation, that ‘Fortune is a principle of everything, and Nature is composed on the basis of what is according to

26 Darbo-Peschanski 1998, 27. Cf. *Quaestiones Romanae* 78, 282e: κόσμου.

27 Darbo-Peschanski 1998, 28.

Fortune, whenever order is generated in what is available by chance' (τὴν τύχην πάντων οὖσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ τὴν φύσιν ἐκ τοῦ κατὰ τύχην συνισταμένην, ὅταν τισὶν ὡς ἔτυχεν ὑποκειμένοις τάξις ἐγγένηται). This explanation (which has parallels in Plutarch's other cosmological writings)²⁸ he emphatically deems 'more natural and philosophical' (φυσικώτερον ἔχει λόγον τὸ πρᾶγμα καὶ φιλοσοφώτερον) than the previous two, which concern the role of Fortune in the specific cases of the birth of Servius and Rome respectively. By speculating about first principles and their operation in this world, as Plutarch does here and also in other problem chapters, the collection of cultural-historical inquiries acquires an overarching cosmological framework. It is by this framework that the work as a whole links up with genuine philosophy. This is the case also, for instance, in *Quaestiones Romanae* 19, 268c–d, where a discussion about the Roman calendar ends up in an astronomical account of the movement of the sun, described as 'the lord and leader of all substances in flux' (τὸν κύριον καὶ ἡγεμόνα τῆς ρευστῆς οὐσίας ἀπάσης). The sun in this case is probably none other than the material reflection of the Platonic Demiurge, who ordered the world of becoming in a providential way.²⁹ What chapters like these nicely illustrate is how the discussion of seemingly trivial topics can eventually evolve into speculations of high philosophical calibre.

5 Plutarch's Philosophy of πολυμάθεια

The types of aetiological overlap studied on the basis of Plutarch's *Quaestiones naturales* contribute to a sense of mutual coherence between Plutarch's collections of *quaestiones* more generally. This does not only testify to the, at times, very close affiliation between the different research projects and strategies at hand in these collections, but also reveals the openness and all-round applicability of many kinds of knowledge to different contexts – an intertextual dynamic that lies at the heart of Plutarch's πολυμάθεια project.

The feature of thematic diversity (ποικιλία) is brought to a climax in the miscellaneous *Quaestiones convivales*, where Plutarch reports on a vast range of discussions held with his peers during festive events throughout

²⁸ Many thanks to Bram Demulder for pointing out the relation with Plutarch's *De animae procreatione in Timaeo* (despite the fact that the concept of τύχη is frustratingly absent there) and for further elucidating this passage to me ("τύχη is the substratum, the material ἀρχή, which is ordered by the Demiurge [i.e. who engenders τάξις] and thus becomes φύσις"; personal communication). Reading the passage in light of *De fortuna Romanorum* may provide further theoretical background but goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

²⁹ Cf., e.g., *De genio Socratis* 591b and *De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet* 945b–c.

the Mediterranean region (including numerous natural problems).³⁰ A seminal passage is in *Quaestiones convivales* 8.10, 734d, where L. Mestrius Florus, Plutarch's Roman *patronus*, is reading a copy of Aristotle's *Problemata physica*, which he shared with his friends for pleasant conversation during their daytime strolls. We read that Florus was 'himself full of questions, as is natural for a philosopher' (αὐτός τε πολλῶν ἀποριῶν, ὅπερ εἰώθασι πάσχειν ἐπιεικῶς αἱ φιλόσοφοι φύσεις, ὑπεπίπλατο), thus confirming Aristotle's saying that 'great learning provides many starting-points' (τὴν πολυμάθειαν πολλὰς ἀρχὰς ποιεῖν, fr. 62 Rose). This quote originates from Aristotle's lost *Περὶ παιδείας*, or *On Education*. Its meaning is not immediately clear from the context, but in light of Plutarch's description of Florus as a philosopher full of questions who shares the Aristotelian *Problemata* with his friends for discussion, the quote does indeed seem to have educational interest. It is very much in line with Plutarch's own aporetic stance in philosophy, where it is acknowledged that the ultimate truth goes beyond our human understanding – a very Platonic-Academic standpoint.³¹ The inquisitive style of the genre of problems, where even the answers are formulated interrogatively, is reminiscent of this aporetic and anti-dogmatic stance. Nothing is conclusive in Plutarch's collections of *quaestiones*, so that doubt will always remain. In this sense, the discussion of all-round scholarly problems does, indeed, provide many 'starting points', but it does not receive final closure.

The ultimate goal for Plutarch, as a Platonist, is to look for philosophical knowledge of first principles; but this will eventually go beyond our human intelligence. We have seen how the discussion of seemingly trivial topics can eventually evolve into more weighty debates of philosophical significance. Notably, the chapter at hand in *Quaestiones convivales* 8.10 examines the nature of dreams and ends with a reference to divination (τὸ μαντικόν), an important modus of divine communication for Plutarch. The goal of the *Quaestiones convivales*, then, is to show how philosophy can be done in real life discussions, over a glass of wine. Plutarch's other aetiological collections of *quaestiones*, by contrast, provide the fuel for such debate. They show that great learning (πολυμάθεια), as engendered by discussing all-round scholarly problems, provides many useful starting-points (ἀρχαί) for more abstract inquiries into philosophical issues. Getting a clear grasp of these philosophical issues is the eventual goal of such inquiries, but this will always remain beyond our mortal reach for Plutarch. The ultimate border that as a Platonist he aims to

30 For a recent study of *Quaestiones convivales* as a sample of ancient miscellaneous literature see Morgan 2011.

31 See Opsomer 1998.

cross is that of matters relating to the sublunary realm, as he directs his gaze at sunnier, divine regions. Arguably, it is this radical philosophical – indeed theological – agenda that lies at the core of Plutarch's *πολυμάθεια* project and which sensitively deepens more traditional concepts of ancient aetiology.³²

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32 What I have not done in this chapter (but have done elsewhere) is to explore the position and value of physical aetiology in Plutarch's natural philosophical programme in general, and more specifically his dualistic view on causality, as inspired by Plato. See Meeusen 2014, 2015 and 2016.

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