
Plutarch's Science of Natural Problems: A Study with Commentary on
Quaestiones Naturales by Michiel Meeussen

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Reviewed by
Malcolm Wilson
University of Oregon
mwilson@uoregon.edu

Plutarch's *Moralia* contains four 'Question' treatises—*Convivial*, *Roman*, *Greek*, and *Natural*—all contributions to the 'problem' genre, all differing in subject and style.

The *Convivial Questions* is a delight. For each question, there is a new drinking party. The symposiasts, friends and relatives of Plutarch, regale us with lively and urbane responses to oenological questions. If their proffered solutions are sometimes a little banal, their affability and wit always refresh us. Plutarch guides the loose structure and episodic character of his genre with inventive flair, and the work as a whole offers a charming fusion of the Platonic *Symposium* and Peripatetic 'problem' literature, free of Aristotelian pedantry and the sobering majesty of *The Beautiful*.

The *Natural Questions*, by contrast, is a drab piece of work, something only a historian of science could love. Consisting of 31 sections (plus 10 preserved by Longolius and Psellus), it solves problems about salt and fresh water and about various plants and animals, wild and tame. In style, it owes most to the ps.-Aristotelian *Problems* with its monotonous 'Why is it that...?' questions and its bare-bones alternative answers. But unlike the *Problems*, a massive reference work tightly organized into 38 books, the *Natural Questions* could fit on a single scroll and wanders apparently at random through its bizarre and miscellaneous queries. Michiel Meeussen generously likens it to Catullus' Alexandrianizing little book of poems [94], where moisture serves as the *leitmotif* in place of *odium et amor*. There may be reasons to believe that the *Natural Questions* could have been polished into a smart *libellus*, but Plutarch clearly never put the pumice to the papyrus.

Meeussen nevertheless thinks that these nuggets are worth something, and he is partly successful in proving it. His book is divided into a set of introductory

essays and a problem-by-problem commentary. Meeussen's main purpose is to show that, consistent with Plutarch's Platonic convictions, the *Natural Questions* combines natural scientific inquiry with theological and religious principles [15–16]. Appropriately, Meeussen poses a problem: Why does Plutarch, an avowed Platonist dedicated to universal teleology, write in a distinctively Aristotelian genre, deeply embedded in a Peripatetic scientific method and low-level teleology? Meeussen offers alternative answers in the course of four chapters.

The tradition of the 'problem' finds its origin in Democritus and became fully integrated into scientific method through the efforts of Aristotle. What value, then, can Plutarch's small and random assortment of problems have for this sophisticated enterprise? And how scientific is a man who asks why bears' paws are tastiest [*Nat. quaest.* 22] and why bees sting adulterers [*Nat. quaest.* 36]? Meeussen rightly answers that Plutarch's purposes differ from Aristotle's, and that scientific inquiry means different things in different contexts and times. Here the *Natural Questions* serves as the model of a 'gentlemanly' science of light subjects artfully arranged. This is certainly not a bad thing, but such trivial and unsystematic treatments are hardly worthy of Plato or Aristotle.

Against the charge of unoriginality, Meeussen [46–51 and 82], like F. H. Sandbach [1969, 134], defends Plutarch on the grounds that he often offers his own novel solutions and rejects those offered by Aristotle or Theophrastus. High praise indeed.

As for chronology, Meeussen seems to favor the view that the *Natural Questions* was composed over a long period of time, starting in Plutarch's youth under the tutelage of Ammonius in Athens. In this opinion, he also seems in harmony with Sandbach, who argued that *Convivial Questions* and *Natural Questions* were written contemporaneously and that they exhibit mutual borrowing [1969, 138].

In one of the most helpful and successful sections of the book, Meeussen explores various orders of the presentation among the four 'Question' treatises. What seemed random at first gradually reveals a subtle order. One problem leads naturally, not rigorously, to the next, and the more distant problems often cross-refer in peculiar and unexpected ways. Such organization is appropriate to the gentlemanly readers of ancient miscellanist writing [92–102]. In the *Natural Questions*, salt water, having dominated the stage

at the beginning, is ushered off by hunting themes only to sneak back in with the salty tears of boars [*Nat. quaest.* 20]. The artful arrangement here suggests that Plutarch may have intended at some point to give this sketchy treatise a full costume performance.

So, scholars have traditionally treated the *Natural Questions* as personal memoranda that Plutarch intended, but failed, to work into a polished literary work like the *Convivial Questions*. Sandbach [1969, 134–135], following Rose and Halliday, suggests that the *Natural Questions* began as notes excerpted from a variety of sources and meant for possible inclusion in other more literary works; that though they may have circulated among friends, they were not intended for general publication.

Meeussen argues, with some plausibility, that Plutarch was interested in problems for their own sake and not just as a stage for literary display. Both the *Roman* and the *Greek Questions* show that ‘problem’ literature admits of several legitimate forms. The alternative explanations of *Roman Questions*, copious though they be, lack all dramatic frame, while in his *Greek Questions* even the alternative solutions are abandoned, and Plutarch is content to give the single correct answer.

If the *Natural Questions* is not just a collection of memoranda, what purpose does it serve? For Plutarch, the usefulness of problems lies partly in their being convenient school exercises. Natural problems are easy and persuasive, and readily yield to solution. At the same time, though, and in a manner reminiscent of Epicurus, they discourage gaping wonder and feeble-minded superstition. Meteorological subjects, of which terrestrial waters form a part, have traditionally invited these reactions. The solution of these problems, by displaying natural causality, combats superstition and leads us to a greater appreciation of the regular, celestial phenomena.

The final introductory chapter continues the work of the third by focusing on the place of the *Natural Questions* in Plutarch’s philosophical outlook. Meeussen argues that with reference to his other works, Plutarch was ‘radically informed by Platonic dualism and generally inspired by Academic Scepticism’ [363]. For Meeussen, this means that Plutarch exercised ἐποχή in the face of the phenomena, but privileged the causes that arose from divine sources; and, therefore, that those causes expressed, or at least hinted at, by myth are credited. The natural causes are then treated as cooperative to the providential cause. Meeussen sees hints of this providence in *Natural*

Questions, but his evidence is slight as he himself admits [272–274]; and the Platonic character of Plutarch's 'problem' treatises cannot be sustained.

These introductory essays are followed by a thorough commentary. Each problem is prefaced by a synopsis in English with the ancient text quite fully quoted in parentheses. In my mind, this is a poor compromise. Either Meeussen should have provided text and facing translation in the standard manner or left his reader to read Sandbach alongside. Nevertheless, Meeussen is responsible in citing the peripheral literature, and makes significant additions to Sensasono's notes (which are amply acknowledged). For my part, I would have gladly traded the synopsis for more description and analysis of the peripheral literature, especially on the scientific and craft issues. So, for example, Plutarch says [*Nat. quaest.* 17] that stallion hairs are preferred to mare hairs for fishing nets. This would have been a good occasion to dilate on fishing nets and their fabrication [426].

Slow readers, like myself, will wish that the author had been more concise or at least, when the subject matter permits, livelier. The theses that Meeussen argues for are readily intelligible (though not always persuasive) and the arguments pro and con could be summarized more succinctly. Frankly, I do not think that the question of whether Plutarch's Platonism was compromised by the Aristotelian 'problem' format is worth 350 pages of analysis. There is a good, useful, and slender book to be found somewhere within this volume, but Meeussen should have kept his muse away from the bear paws [*Nat. quaest.* 22].

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