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A Wine a Day …: Medical Experts and Expertise in Plutarch's *Table Talk*

Michiel Meeusen | ORCID: 0000-0003-4013-4049
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Leuven, Belgium
michiel.meeusen@kuleuven.be

Abstract

This contribution examines the important role that medical experts and expertise played at convivial networking events in the High Roman Empire, as imagined by a non-specialist in the field, viz. the famous Platonist intellectual Plutarch of Chaeronea (ca. 45–120 CE). An analysis of a number of medical problems discussed in his *Table Talk* will yield fresh insights into the social and intellectual role which doctors, as members of the educated elite, were expected to play in convivial community contexts and also how popular or common had become certain theories, concepts and beliefs relating to health and healing in the High Imperial era. At the same time, it will give a clearer idea of what was the place of medical experts and expertise in Plutarch's intellectual programme, and how this interest ties in with his (natural) philosophical endeavours more generally.

Keywords

ancient medicine and philosophy – High Roman Empire – Plutarch of Chaeronea – *Table Talk* – symposia – problems (προβλήματα)

1 Setting the Scene

As is well known, physicians participated eagerly in the cultural world of the High Roman Empire (ca. first to second century CE). Doctors like Galen of Pergamum had enjoyed an education similar to that of philosophers, sophists, and scholars, which enabled them to move effortlessly in higher social circles

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and connect with those who had power and influence.[1] Medical men interacted keenly with other intellectuals, whom they joined, for instance, in the Museum at Ephesus and probably elsewhere.[2] In this paper, I will investigate what role medical physicians played in other such social-intellectual settings, namely at the symposia and dinner parties of the cultured elite, as imagined by a non-specialist author in the field, the famous Platonic philosopher Plutarch.

Although not an expert himself, Plutarch of Chaeronea (ca. 45–120 CE) took a more than average interest in the field of medicine.[3] His study journey to Alexandria may have sparked his curiosity, as he will have had opportunities here to meet and converse with physicians about their medical art (ἰατρικὴ τέχνη). Several of Plutarch's friends and acquaintances – Cleomenes, Moschion, Nicias, Onesicrates, Trypho, to name only a few – were also doctors by profession. And in some of his dialogues, medical experts are staged as interlocutors in the debate. This is the case, most notably, in the *Precepts of Healthcare*, a dialogue between a physician (Moschion) and his friend (Zeuxippus) concerning the impact of intellectual living on the human body and mind. But physicians make their appearance also at the convivial events described in the *Table Talk* (*Quaestiones convivales*; hereafter: *QC*), where they participate in a wide range of intellectual discussions with Plutarch and his peers (amongst whom are philosophers, historians, rhetoricians, politicians, grammarians, priests, etc.). The work provides a particularly lively image of how physicians socialised with a range of other educated members of high society at numerous festive events that took place throughout the Mediterranean region.[4]

1 Galen was not exceptional in this regard; see Vivian Nutton, "The Medical Meeting-Place," in *Ancient Medicine in Its Socio-Cultural Context*, ed. Philip J. van der Eijk et al., 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1995), 1: 3–25, at 9; idem, *Ancient Medicine*, 2nd ed. (London–New York, 2013), 224.

2 Nutton, "Medical Meeting-Place," 8–9 and idem, *Ancient Medicine*, 216.

3 See Richard J. Durling, "Medicine in Plutarch's *Moralia*," *Traditio*, 50 (1995), 311–314, who rightly concludes (at 314): "the chief value of Plutarch's medical knowledge is as a lay-witness to pre-Galenic medicine." Essential reading is Jacques Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. II.37.3, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin–New York, 1996), 2762–2792 (especially 2765–2767nn.28–42 for a list of medicine-related passages throughout the *corpus Plutarcheum*). For further literature on Plutarch's medical interests, see Lieve Van Hoof, "Plutarch's 'Diet-Ethics': *Precepts of Healthcare* between Diet and Ethics," in *Virtues for the People: Aspects of Plutarch's Ethics*, ed. Geert Roskam and Luc Van der Stockt (Leuven, 2011), 109–129, at 110n.5; Maria Vamvouri Ruffy, *Les Vertus thérapeutiques du banquet: Médecine et idéologie dans les* Propos de Table *de Plutarque* (Paris, 2012), at 13n.12.

4 Doctors appear not only as guests but also as hosts: e.g., doctor Philo in *QC* 4.1 and doctor Onesicrates in *QC* 5.5–6. More generally on the *Table Talk* and its intellectual and ideological context, see Frieda Klotz and Katerina Oikonomopoulou, eds., *The Philosopher's Banquet: Plutarch's* Table Talk *in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2011). For the therapeutic dimension of these conversations, see Maria Vamvouri Ruffy, "Symposium,

Exploring the ways in which Plutarch stages medical experts and expertise at these parties, and his reasons for doing so, will add a fascinating, and thus far unexplored, perspective on the doctor's social and intellectual role in the time of the High Roman Empire.[5] But before putting on our sympotic flower-garlands we should first take a closer look at the *Precepts*, as Plutarch there reflects on how philosophy and medicine should ideally relate to each other.

2 A Gentleman's Health: Between Medicine and Philosophy

In line with the traditional interest philosophers had for the art of healing, and contrariwise, physicians for philosophy, Plutarch in the beginning of the *Precepts* emphasises the intellectual reciprocity between both disciplines, declaring – indirectly, by mouth of his friend Zeuxippus – that "medicine is inferior to none of the liberal arts in subtlety, acuteness, and the pleasure which it yields."[6] The debate dates back to the Hippocratic *On Ancient Medicine*, but still fuelled much lively discussion in the time of Galen, who himself famously defends the use of a philosophical training of doctors (vs. the Methodists) in *The Best Doctor is also a Philosopher*. Plutarch takes virtually the same position in the debate as will Galen roughly one generation later, albeit from the viewpoint of a philosopher seeking to establish a close alliance with medical professionals rather than the other way around. To this end, he has Zeuxippus in the introduction strike out at doctor Glaucus, a physician "not kindly disposed towards philosophy," for stating "that the subjects of philosophy and medicine are as 'far remote' from each other as 'are the boundaries of' any 'Mysians and

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Physical and Social Health in Plutarch's *Table Talk*," in Klotz and Oikonomopoulou, *Philosopher's Banquet*, 131–157; eadem, *Vertus thérapeutiques*.

5 As such, this contribution aims to complement and further contextualise Flemming's study of the place of medical knowledge in Athenaeus' *Learned Banqueters*: Rebecca Flemming, "The Physicians at the Feast: The Place of Medical Knowledge at Athenaeus' Dinner-Table," in *Athenaeus and his World: Reading Greek Culture in the Roman Empire*, ed. David Braund and John Wilkins (Exeter, 2000), 476–482. At the same time, it expands on Luchner's study of Plutarch's medical interests in the *Moralia* by taking a closer look at its natural philosophical aspects: Katharina Luchner, *Philiatroi: Studien zum Thema der Krankheit in der griechischen Literatur der Kaiserzeit* (Göttingen, 2004), 176–186 (explicitly side-lined at 177n.36).

6 On the interaction between philosophy and medicine, see Michael Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN, 1987), 225–242; Philip J. van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity: Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease* (Cambridge, 2005). The quote is from Plutarch, *De tuenda sanitate praecepta* 122E: τῶν ἐλευθερίων δὲ τεχνῶν ἰατρικὴ τὸ μὲν γλαφυρὸν καὶ περιττὸν καὶ ἐπιτερπὲς οὐδεμιᾶς ἐνδεέστερον ἔχει. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from ancient authors are from the Loeb Classical Library with sporadic modifications, <www.loebclassics.com>.

Phrygians'."[7] Doctor Moschion, by contrast, is complimented for his "natural gift for philosophy" and also for the fact that he feels "incensed at the philosopher who does not take an interest in medicine (φιλιατροῦντι)."[8] Although Plutarch is making use of the dialogue format in expressing these ideas (a literary genre well known for its authorial self-effacement), there can be no doubt that he would count himself among these amateurs of medicine (φιλίατροι).[9]

But despite the *Precepts*' plea for an eradication of all interdisciplinary borders (not just between philosophy and medicine, but between all honourable studies), its 'hygienic' prescriptions are not highly concerned with the technical side of medicine as such (in reference to medicine being a τέχνη or 'art' with its own rules and conventions). Plutarch rather instrumentalises a vast range of medical knowledge in support of his ethical-therapeutic agenda of *Seelenheilung* – dubbed "diet-ethics" by Van Hoof.[10] This agenda has as its main goal the promotion of a rational-philosophical life-style aimed at attaining moral virtue. Central to this pursuit is the idea that an impaired body prevents the soul from fully developing and thus attaining ἀρετή (virtue).[11]

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7 Plutarch, *De tuenda* 122C: οὐκ εὐμενὴς δὲ πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν. [...] χωρίς γὰρ ἔφη τὰ φιλοσόφων καὶ ἰατρῶν ὥσπερ τινῶν Μυσῶν καὶ Φρυγῶν ὁρίσματα. On reactions by medics against philosophy, see Jacques Jouanna, *Hippocrates*, tr. Malcolm B. DeBevoise (Baltimore, MD–London, 1999), 259–285. Glaucus' anti-philosophical stance (criticised here in the beginning of *De tuenda* 122BE, and also indirectly in chapters 2–5) may imply that he was a Methodist doctor, cf. Luigi Senzasono, *Precetti igienici* (Naples, 1992), 17; Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2772n.84, also 2764n.17. But it is not impossible that Plutarch simply aims to present him as a medical 'specialist', cf. Senzasono, *Precetti igienici*, 18–19 ("caricature" is probably too harsh, cf. 143). It is uncertain whether this Glaucus should be identified with the physician whose recipe for unguents against excessive pain Galen describes in *De compositione medicamentorum secundum locos* 4 (12.743 Kühn).

8 Plutarch, *De tuenda* 122D: φιλόσοφος γὰρ εἶ τὴν φύσιν, ὦ Μοσχίων, καὶ τῷ μὴ φιλιατροῦντι χαλεπαίνεις φιλοσόφῳ.

9 Cf. Luchner, *Philiatroi*, 178. Surely many of Plutarch's own ideas and convictions about medicine and health must be present in this dialogue. In fact, Plutarch has been identified as the "companion" (ἑταῖρος) to whom Zeuxippus refers in *De tuenda* 122F; see Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch's* Moralia *in Sixteen Volumes*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA–London, 1928), 215 and 220 note a.

10 Heinz Gerd Ingenkamp, *Plutarchs Schriften über die Heilung der Seele* (Göttingen, 1971); Lieve Van Hoof, *Plutarch's Practical Ethics: The Social Dynamics of Philosophy* (Oxford, 2010), 211–254; eadem, "Plutarch's 'Diet-Ethics'." This could be achieved more precisely by the treatment of moral-psychological pathologies (i.e., ethical vices, κακία, such as anger, fear, lust, etc.). For the place of Plutarch's writings on practical ethics in their wider medical context, cf. Christopher Gill, *Naturalistic Psychology in Galen and Stoicism* (Oxford, 2012), 246–280; Peter N. Singer et al., tr., *Galen: Psychological Writings* (Cambridge, 2013), 207–217.

11 Cf. the conclusion in Plutarch, *De tuenda* 137E: "We should feel that of the good gifts which fair and lovely Health bestows the fairest is the unhampered opportunity to get and to use virtue both in words and in deeds."

As Babbitt pointed out, the *Precepts* are "meant for men whose work is done with their heads rather than their hands."[12] The kind of dietetical advice on offer ranges from "exercises suitable for scholars" to proper nutrition tips for philosophers (e.g., to practice abstinence and avoid the pleasures of the belly).[13] In line with Plutarch's philosophical allegiance to Plato and the Academy, the treatise as a whole is firmly rooted in Platonic preconceptions about the human body and mind and the ways in which they interact.[14] For Plato, as for Plutarch, health depends on the equilibrium of body and mind, as is seen, most notably, in the *Timaeus*, a work of core-intellectual impact on Plutarch's own thinking regarding the physical world.[15] Similar concerns lie at the heart of (the four remaining chapters of) Plutarch's *Whether the Affections of the Soul are Worse than Those of the Body*, where he argues, in the same Platonic vein, that affections (πάθη) of the soul are, indeed, worse than those of the body.[16] After all, the person who suffers from psychological affections is not aware that he is actually ill, so that he cannot improve his condition, which as a consequence will deteriorate further.

The mainly practical philosophical orientation of these medically invested discourses is not very surprising, considering the overall ethical aspirations of

12 Babbitt, *Plutarch's* Moralia, 214. Sven-Tage Teodorsson, "Plutarch on the Noble Art of Preserving the Health," in *Plutarco y las artes*, ed. Germán Santana Henríquez (Madrid, 2013), 241–248, at 247–248 rightly observes, moreover, that by mainly focusing on upper-class men (cf. *De tuenda* 137C), Plutarch has nothing to say about the healthcare of women and children. Cf. Senzasono, *Precetti igienici*, 48–54.

13 *De tuenda* 130A: περὶ γυμνασίων φιλολόγοις ἁρμοζόντων. Cf. Teodorsson, "Plutarch," 241: "theoretical speculation is practically absent; Plutarch does not even mention the humoral theory. The Aristotelian principle of the middle course is his guiding rule, and he refers to Plato for simplicity in food and drink. In accordance with the Hippocratic tradition of regimen he is highly concerned with diet and digestion. He would certainly have assented vividly to the phrase often heard today, 'you are what you eat'."

14 For Plutarch's Platonism in the *Precepts*, see Senzasono, *Precetti igienici*, 19–25 (for his medical sources, see 11–19 and 27–29).

15 Cf., e.g., Plato, *Timaeus* 88c: "The mathematician […] or the ardent devotee of any other intellectual discipline should also provide exercise for his body by taking part in gymnastics, while one who takes care to develop his body should in his turn practice the exercises of the soul by applying himself to the arts and to every pursuit of wisdom, if he is to truly deserve the joint epithets of 'fine and good'"; tr. John M. Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN, 1997), 1287. Cf. Plutarch, *De tuenda* 137E: "Plato was right, therefore, in advising that there should be no movement of the body without the mind or of the mind without the body, but that we should preserve, as it were, the even balance of a well-matched team."

16 *Animine an corporis affectiones sint peiores* 501E: "It is worse to be sick (νοσεῖν) in soul than in body; for men afflicted in body only suffer, but those afflicted in soul both suffer and do ill." The same problem recurs in Maximus of Tyre, *Dissertationes* 7; see Michael B. Trapp, *Maximus of Tyre: The Philosophical Orations* (Oxford, 1997), 59.

most of Plutarch's *Moralia*. But the same dynamics can be observed at a micro-discursive level in Plutarch's frequent use, throughout his oeuvre, of medical comparisons and metaphors, aimed at achieving a specific moralising effect.[17] Atheism, for instance, he compares with blindness, and superstition with an eye-disease that needs to be cured.[18] The mind-body duality again plays a structuring role in such cases. On other occasions, he compares politicians, philosophers and close acquaintances with physicians who bestow their therapeutic practices on their patients.[19] But concerns relating to medical deontology, and more precisely the overtly unethical procedures of medical doctors, also provide a welcome source of inspiration to underpin Plutarch's moralising arguments. We learn, for instance, that "it is not like friendship, but sophistry, to seek glory in other men's faults, and to make a fair show before the spectators, like the physicians who perform operations in the theatres with an eye to attracting patients."[20] The context concerns the use of frank speech (παρρησία) to correct a friend in public. Plutarch's point is that "error should be treated as a foul disease (νοσήματος)," but the patient's privacy should be respected and his errors not be publicly disclosed. Interestingly, the word used here, ἀπόρρητον (not to be spoken, secret), is the same as the one used in the Hippocratic *Oath* to express the doctor's sworn discretion about what he sees or hears when on or off duty.[21]

3 Medical Problems: Scope and Method

Plutarch does not, however, deploy medical knowledge in support of his ethical philosophy only. As an Imperial philosopher and all-round, encyclopaedic intellectual, he seems to have had a genuine interest in medicine also from a more theoretical, that is a natural philosophical, perspective. Several problems

17 On medical metaphors in Plutarch, see Eleni Plati, "Medical Metaphors in Plutarch: The Example of πολιτικὴ ἰατρεία" (PhD diss., University of Hamburg, 2020); eadem, "Medical Allusions and Intertext of Physis in Plutarch's *Comp. Cim. et Luc.* 2.7," in *The Dynamics of Intertextuality in Plutarch*, ed. Thomas S. Schmidt, Maria Vamvouri and Rainer Hirsch-Luipold (Leiden–Boston, MA, 2020), 376–387.

18 See Plutarch, *De superstitione* 167AB and *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* 1101C respectively.

19 See the analysis of José Francisco Martín del Pozo, "El médico como referente pedagógico en Plutarco," in *Estudios sobre Plutarco: aspectos formales*, ed. José Antonio Fernandez Delgado and Francisca Pordomingo Pardo (Madrid, 1996), 185–192.

20 *Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur* 71A.

21 *Iusiurandum* 7 (630.17 Littré). Indeed, the *Oath* suggests just how badly a moral code was needed for at least some medical practitioners.

under discussion in the *Table Talk* concern specific medical topics, including anatomy, physiology, dietetics and new diseases.

These chapters come in the form of specific problems (προβλήματα), much in the style of the Aristotelian *Natural Problems*, which is repeatedly drawn from.[22] Plutarch employs the same question-and-answer approach in his *Causes of Natural Phenomena*.[23] And as Oikonomopoulou has argued for the so-called *Supplementary Problems* (variously attributed to Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias but probably spurious), some of its medical, and more broadly natural scientific, contents can also be surmised to have the performance culture of the ancient symposium as its background.[24] This suggests just how versatile this genre of ancient scientific writing must have been and also how effective for spicing up intellectual events that were not strictly – nor even necessarily – medical in kind. It is perhaps also worth mentioning in this regard that we have epigraphic evidence that the medical contests held annually in Ephesus during the Great Asclepieia included a specific discipline named the "problem" (πρόβλημα).[25] Scholars have situated these competitions in the public setting of medical demonstrations (ἐπιδείξεις) and the doctors' public struggle for patients (as known from Galen's writings), arguing that oratory was probably the decisive factor in these contests, rather than medical knowledge per se.[26]

22 For Aristotelian knowledge in the *Table Talk*, see Katerina Oikonomopoulou, "Peripatetic Knowledge in Plutarch's *Table Talk*," in Klotz and Oikonomopoulou, *Philosopher's Banquet*, 105–130; Michiel Meeusen, "Aristotle's Authority in the Tradition of Natural Problems: The Case of Plutarch of Chaeronea," in *Shaping Authority: How Did a Person Become an Authority in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance?* ed. Shari Boodts et al. (Turnhout, 2016), 47–85.

23 Michiel Meeusen, *Plutarch's Science of Natural Problems: A Study with Commentary on* Quaestiones Naturales (Leuven, 2016). Medical issues covered include, e.g., rash caused by dew (*QN* 6), seasickness (11), auto-remediation in animals (26).

24 Katerina Oikonomopoulou, "Author(s) and Reader(s) in the *Supplementary Problems* (*Supplementa Problematorum*)," in *Ancient Greek Medicine in Questions and Answers: Diagnostics, Didactics, Dialectics*, ed. Michiel Meeusen (Leiden–Boston, MA, 2020), 55–79.

25 *Inscriptiones Ephesi* 1161.5, 1162.6–7, 1166.2. The precise meaning is contested; see Nutton, "Medical Meeting-Place," 7–8 and idem, *Ancient Medicine*, 216n.72.

26 See Manfred (Herman Frederik Johan) Horstmanshoff, "The Ancient Physician: Craftsman or Scientist?" *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 45 (1990), 176–197, at 182: "I find it hard to avoid the impression that [...] bombastic, ranting speech-making won the day"; see also the conclusion in Michiel Meeusen, "Ps.-Alexander of Aphrodisias on Unsayable Properties in *Medical Puzzles and Natural Problems*," in Meeusen, *Ancient Greek Medicine*, 80–107, at 100–101.

That such problems were indeed very suitable for rhetorical extemporisation is clear from the following examples drawn from Plutarch's *Table Talk*: "Why are old men very fond of strong wine?" (*QC* 1.7), "Why do men become hungrier in autumn?" (2.2), "Are women colder in temperament or hotter?" (3.4), "What is the suitable time for coition?" (3.6), "Is a variety of food more easily digested than one kind alone?" (4.1), "Why are those who fast more thirsty than hungry?" (6.1), "What is the cause of βουλιμία (ox hunger)?" (6.8), "Is it possible for new diseases to come into being, and from what causes?" (8.9).[27]

As is more often the case with the sympotic debates collected in the *Table Talk*, most of the topics under discussion are suitably fashioned to fit the convivial context at hand, especially those on hunger, thirst, and the beneficent properties of certain foodstuffs (i.e., mainly dietetical questions). Indeed, the material reality of consumption at the symposium fostered much lively debate concerning topics relating to the origin, physical qualities, and cultural value of sympotic staples and tools (such as wine, bread, water, fish, meat, vegetables), which could then ramify into the investigation of broader natural and cultural phenomena. Some of these medical debates do have ethical implications, as is the case with the problem about new diseases which, according to Plutarch's own conclusive contribution to the discussion, were caused by the luxurious life-style endemic to his time.[28] But most problems are concerned, in line with their Aristotelian model, with natural scientific inquiry. Under scrutiny are the physical principles at work in the natural phenomena at issue, which are explained mainly in terms of their material and instrumental causes (i.e., material elements, qualities, physical processes, etc.).

For instance, in dealing with the question as to why ox hunger (βουλιμία) attacks especially those who walk through heavy snow (*QC* 6.8), Plutarch, as a sympotic interlocutor, brings up the Aristotelian explanation from the *Problems*, where the same question was already treated.[29] The affliction is caused, so we read, by a process of internal concentration of heat due to surrounding cold (i.e., the process of ἀντιπερίστασις) which produces a morbid

27 See also the list in Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2766n.30.

28 More precisely, it is the change in diet (δίαιτα) and the resulting bodily mixture (κρᾶσις) that creates new diseases and makes old ones disappear. For a synopsis, see Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 36; Teodorsson, "Plutarch," 241–242. For the association between luxurious and unhealthy eating, cf. also *QC* 4.1, where doctor Philo hosts a "mighty feast," thus triggering a consideration of the problem as to whether a variety of food is more easily digested than one kind alone.

29 [Aristotle], *Problemata* 8.9, 887b38–888a23.

liquefaction/colliquation in the body.[30] The discussion then proceeds, with some persons attacking Aristotle's theory, others advocating it, by invoking alternative natural causes that could explain the phenomenon.

Importantly, from a methodological perspective, and in line with Plutarch's dualistic view on causality, this type of inquiry into natural causes is not to be considered of high philosophical standing. In accordance with his Platonic convictions, Plutarch subjects natural causes to higher, divine ones (while still considering them synergetic). Philosophy is primarily concerned with the latter type of cause.[31] A seminal passage for this is *On the Principle of Cold* 8, 948 BC, where Plutarch gives an account of the proper method to be followed in studying natural phenomena. He there demarcates the domain of (natural) philosophy from that of the arts and crafts (τέχναι) on the basis of the different procedures followed by their respective practitioners. Whereas a 'technician' or craftsman (τεχνίτης), such as a doctor (but also, e.g., a farmer or a musician), limits his research to the immediate natural causes of the phenomenon under consideration (say, the causes of physical illness: fever, for instance, is caused by exertion or an overflow of the blood), the natural philosopher (φυσικός/φιλόσοφος) continues his intellectual pursuit further 'upwards' – that is, from the technical data pertaining to sense perception (τὰ αἰσθητά) towards the intelligible principles (αἱ νοηταὶ ἀρχαί).[32] In other words, it is the pursuit of the philosopher to lead his inquiry back to the first principles as much as possible, whereas, for a technician, knowledge of secondary causes suffices to do his proper job (e.g., to cure a disease, in the case of physicians).[33]

30 Plutarch, *QC* 6.8, 694DE: "Then I brought up the Aristotelian passage in which it is stated that when there is great cold outside the body the inward parts become exceedingly heated and produce a great deal of morbid liquefaction. Now if the liquefied matter collects in the legs it causes fatigue and heaviness; if it gathers at the roots of motor energy or of respiration, it causes fainting and weakness."

31 See Meeusen, *Plutarch's Science*, 258–264.

32 These νοηταὶ ἀρχαί go beyond the basic material setup of the world as they belong to a different, viz. intelligible, ontological realm. In the present context, Plutarch refers to Plato's geometric atoms and Democritus' atoms as belonging to these 'higher' principles; see Jan Opsomer, "Plutarch on the Geometry of the Elements," in *Natural Spectaculars: Aspects of Plutarch's Philosophy of Nature*, ed. Michiel Meeusen and Luc Van der Stockt (Leuven, 2015), 29–55. Cf. *QC* 8.2, 718D on geometry as "drawing us away from the world of sense to which we cling, and turning us towards the intelligible and eternal level of existence, the contemplation of which is the goal of philosophy […]."

33 The idea that doctors require only 'technical' knowledge to do their proper job ties in with the wider debate about method between doctors and philosophers. Erasistratus and Herophilus, for instance, believed that doctors should concern themselves with both the uniform (e.g., bone and flesh) and non-uniform levels of the body (e.g., a face or hand) but not the underlying physical elements (earth, wind, water, fire), as that was the job of

By subjecting 'technical' to 'philosophical' knowledge, Plutarch makes it clear that the search for natural causes provides only the beginning (ἀρχή) for an investigation into the higher, intelligible principles operative in the world.[34] Therefore, technical knowledge can be considered a first step towards genuine natural philosophical contemplation (θεωρία). This distinction is highly programmatic for the scientific method Plutarch employs in his natural problems, including the medical ones. It is precisely because of their technical focus on natural causes that the kind of inquiry at issue in these problems is, in a way, 'pre-philosophical', in that it only provides a "leg up for philosophy at its best."[35] Nevertheless, as I will try to show in what follows, the natural/medical problems discussed in the *Table Talk* do at times exemplify how such scientific debates can eventually lead to higher philosophical contemplations, especially when it comes to questions of scientific method and worldview.

So far, we have seen that despite Plutarch's attempt in the *Precepts* to ally medicine with philosophy, he acknowledges a clear hierarchy between both disciplines based on methodological grounds. It remains to be seen, then, what is the precise place of medical experts and expertise in the philosophically oriented *Table Talk* and how this image may nuance the *mariage parfait* sketched in the *Precepts*.

4 Sympotic Community and Technicality

The *Table Talk* yields a particularly lively image of how doctors participated in intellectual debates at several convivial events in Greece and Rome. Taken together, the situations sketched by Plutarch are probably no 'pure fiction', though this is not to deny their literary character. It remains a vexed question, but given especially the historicity of several of the sympotic situations and interlocutors, it is now generally agreed that the debates draw a literary image that is 'real enough' to be taken seriously.[36] At the very least, we here have a

philosophers. This coincides with the role that fell to physicians of the time to not act as (natural) philosophers. Galen, however, believed that to understand the human body one had to understand the mixture of its elements; see David Leith, "Elements and Uniform Parts in Early Alexandrian Medicine," *Phronesis*, 60 (2015), 462–491 (with references).

34 See Michiel Meeusen, "Natural Philosophy, *Technè* and Technicality in Plutarch," in *Plutarco y las artes*, ed. Germán Santana Henríquez (Madrid, 2013), 157–167.

35 This point is made regarding Plutarch's *Causes of Natural Phenomena* by Luc Van der Stockt, "Some Aspects of Plutarch's View of the Physical World: Interpreting *Causes of Natural Phenomena*," in *Plutarco transmisor*, ed. José M. Candau Morón, Francisco José González Ponce and Antonio L. Chávez Reino (Seville, 2011), 447–455, at 452.

36 Plutarch also stages a physician, Cleodorus, in the fictitious *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*. Cf. Plato's *Symposium*, in which doctor Eryximachus participates (in his speech, he uses

more or less credible literary depiction of sympotic reality and of how doctors were expected to behave, and probably how they also really behaved, at such social events.

Throughout the work, importantly, Plutarch repeatedly emphasises the notion of 'community' (κοινωνία) as a critical aspect of convivial decorum, according to which sociable debate over a cup of wine serves a 'friend-making' goal (φιλοποιόν) aimed, presumably, at unifying the intellectual upper-class and, thus, consolidating Greek identity in an increasingly Roman world.[37] The centrality of philosophy as a collective search for the truth, which Plutarch time and again opposes to the sophistic show-offery of one's personal πολυμάθεια ('great learning'), clearly distinguishes his intellectual symposia from those recorded in Athenaeus' *Learned Banqueters* (ca. 200 CE), where the link between the sympotic genre and the Second Sophistic adoration of παιδεία ('education') is far more discomfiting (notably, Galen of Pergamum is listed among the guests at the very beginning of the first book).[38] The social dynamics of Plutarch's symposia have direct intellectual repercussions, in that technical issues had to be toned down so as to include non-experts in the debate as well. "Just as the wine must be common to all, so too the debate must be one in which all can share," is what Plutarch states himself as an interlocutor in the very first discussion.[39]

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medical language to describe love in bodily terms). For further literature, see Josef Martin, *Symposion: die Geschichte einer literarischen Form* (Paderborn, 1931), 79–92. As to the historicity of the *Table Talk*, I side with Frances Titchener, "Plutarch's *Table Talk*: Sampling a Rich Blend. A Survey of Scholarly Appraisal," in Klotz and Oikonomopoulou, *Philosopher's Banquet*, 35–48, 39, who is probably right that the work presents us with "what might have happened, could have happened, and periodically had in fact happened." Many of the characters Plutarch stages as sympotic interlocutors were historical figures; cf. Bernadette Puech, "Prosopographie des amis de Plutarque," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. II.33.3, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin–New York, 1992), 4831–4893. Cf. also Geert Roskam, "Plutarch's 'Socratic Symposia': The Symposia of Plato and Xenophon as Literary Models in the *Quaestiones convivales*," *Athenaeum*, 98 (2010), 45–70, at 64 (and 46–48 more generally).

37 On 'community' in Plutarch's *Table Talk*, see Luc Van der Stockt, "Aspects of the Ethics and Poetics of the Dialogue in the *Corpus Plutarcheum*," in *I generi letterari in Plutarco*, ed. Italo Gallo and Claudio Moreschini (Naples, 2000), 93–116, at 94. More generally, see also Jason König, *Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture* (Cambridge, 2012), 30–59.

38 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 1.1e–f, where he is described as someone "who had published more medical and philosophical treatises than all his predecessors and was not inferior to any of the ancient doctors in his diagnoses"; see Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 235 and 247; and Flemming, "Physicians at the Feast," 476 and 479–480.

39 Plutarch, *QC* 1.1, 614E: δεῖ γὰρ ὡς τὸν οἶνον κοινὸν εἶναι καὶ τὸν λόγον, οὗ πάντες μεθέξουσιν. Plutarch had stated previously that "the matters of inquiry must be in themselves rather simple and easy, the topics familiar, the subjects for investigation suitably uncomplicated,

So, how do medical experts demonstrate their knowledge at such social events, and what do they contribute to the debate? How are technical, medical issues communicated? And how does medical expertise function as a community shaping factor, as being conducive to sympotic *koinōnia*? Answering questions such as these will yield fresh insights into the socio-intellectual role doctors, as members of the educated elite, were expected to fulfil in convivial community contexts and also how 'popular' or 'common' certain theories, concepts and beliefs relating to health and healing had become in the High Imperial era. At the same time, it will give a clearer idea of what was the actual place of medical experts and expertise in Plutarch's intellectual programme, and how this interest ties in with his philosophical endeavours more generally.

5 Physicians at the Feast

There has been relatively little work on how Plutarch represents doctors in general and in the *Table Talk* in particular.[40] It is no news that doctors (especially in the Greek speaking East) generally enjoyed a high social status (there is enough epigraphic evidence to back this up).[41] Nevertheless, Plutarch characterises doctors first and foremost in cultural and intellectual, rather than socio-economic, terms: they are well-educated and capable of usefully contributing to the sympotic conversations by formulating plausible arguments

so that the less intellectual guests may neither be stifled nor turned away. […] One must banish the talk of 'wranglers,' as Democritus calls them, and of 'phrase-twisting' sophists, talk which involves them in strenuous argument about complex and abstruse subjects and irritates those who happen to be present" (614DE). Further on, we read that "to engage in pedantic argumentation over one's wine is a sophistical thing to do, and it is not seemly nor is it suitable to a party" (615B).

40 See the list of names in Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2764–2765 (who notes, with regard to medicine more generally, 2762: "Il est un pan de la pensée de Plutarque qui reste largement inexploré") and the short overview in Roskam, "Plutarch's 'Socratic Symposia'," 63–64. Cf. also Martín del Pozo, "El medico."

41 Cf. Vivian Nutton, "Healers in the Medical Market Place: Towards a Social History of Graeco-Roman Medicine," in *Medicine and Society: Historical Essays*, ed. Andrew Wear (Cambridge, 1992), 15–58, at 42–43: "This [social standing of doctors in the Roman West] is in sharp contrast to the picture of the social position of doctors provided by inscriptions from the Roman East. Here the doctor is frequently a prosperous member of local provincial society, and if not as wealthy as a great magnate like Polemo or Herodes Atticus, at least on speaking terms with them." Cf. also Henri Willy Pleket, "The Social Status of Physicians in the Graeco-Roman World," in van der Eijk et al., *Ancient Medicine in Its Socio-Cultural Context*, 1: 27–34, at 31–34; Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 263.

and by citing relevant literature in support of those arguments. Their knowledge is not restricted to the field of medicine alone, as they quote and discuss all types of poetry, and also hold their ground when dealing with other fields of knowledge (e.g., questions of botany).[42] Their acquaintance with philosophy is remarked explicitly several times: doctor Zopyrus, for instance, is "very well acquainted with the works of Epicurus," doctor Marcion quotes Socrates, Empedocles and Plato, and we know from the introduction of the *Precepts* that doctor Moschion, staged in *QC* 3.10, is "philosophical by nature."[43] Bearing in mind the argument of the *Precepts*, it is perhaps not surprising that it is a medical physician, doctor Crato, who describes philosophy as "the art of life" in the very first and highly programmatic talk (the problem at issue is whether philosophy is a fitting topic for conversation at a drinking party).[44]

42 In Plutarch, *QC* 3.10, 658BC, doctor Moschion quotes Homer, Archilochus, and Ion in support of his argument about the disintegrative effects of the moon on meat; in *QC* 3.1, 646E–648A, doctor Trypho cites Sophocles and Alcaeus in his comments about the medicinal properties of flower-garlands; in *QC* 4.1, 662A–664A, doctor Marcion quotes Eupolis, Empedocles and Homer in support of his argument in favour of a variety of food; and in *QC* 7.1, 697F, doctor Nicias of Nicopolis proceeds to interpret the Alcaeus passage quoted by a 'certain' dinner guest about drink and the lungs. In *QC* 2.6, we find doctor Crato and doctor Philo of Hyampolis discussing a botanical problem (Why the fir and pine and similar trees are not grafted), as does doctor Trypho in *QC* 3.1–2 (Whether flower-garlands should be used at drinking-parties; Concerning ivy, whether its nature is hot or cold) and also in *QC* 5.8 (on interpreting a Homeric line: Why does Homer speak of the apple tree as "splendid in its fruit" and Empedocles call apples "succulent?"). The close connection between botany and pharmacology explains its relevance to doctors, as is acknowledged by doctor Trypho in *QC* 3.1, 646F: "much of their [sc. the ancients'] art of medicine depended upon the medical properties of plants" (πλείστῃ κεχρημένους ἀπὸ φυτῶν ἰατρικῇ).

43 For Zopyrus' reference to Epicurus, see Plutarch, *QC* 3.6, 653C (concerning the suitable time for coition), where he paraphrases Epicurus' *Symposium* and adds his own convictions as a physician (653C–654B). For Marcion's references to Socrates, Empedocles and Plato, see *QC* 4.1, 662A–664A (arguing in favour of a variety of food); on this Marcion, see note 47. On Moschion's "philosophical nature," see Plutarch, *De tuenda* 122D: φιλόσοφος γὰρ εἶ τὴν φύσιν. In *QC* 3.10, 658AC, he contributes to the problem about the disintegrative effects of the moon on meat.

44 Plutarch, *QC* 1.1, 613B: τέχνην περὶ βίον. His point is that philosophy orders and regulates all aspects of life and therefore also has its proper place at dinner parties. That Crato was presumably a physician is suggested at *QC* 4.4, 669C, where he and Zeno are said to prescribe fish for the weak, because it is the lightest meat, before allowing them any other. He was a relative of Plutarch, cf. *QC* 1.4, 620A: ὁ γαμβρὸς ἡμῶν. He is not, however, to be identified with doctor Crato of Gargetos (*Inscriptiones Graecae*^{2} II 5935); see Sven-Tage Teodorsson, *A Commentary on Plutarch's Table Talks*, 3 vols. (Göteborg, 1989–1996), 1: 42–43.

This all suggests that doctors have benefitted from a broader intellectual training, but even so medical topics remain their main area of expertise, and they are explicitly commended for their professional knowledge in this field. For instance, in *QC* 3.1, doctor Trypho is explicitly prompted by a fellow symposiast to speak "out of his knowledge of medicine" (about the medicinal properties of flower-garlands).[45] The same doctor Trypho intervenes in *QC* 9.14 as the spokesperson for all the physicians in the discussion about the number of the Muses: "What of our art? Why on earth have you barred the Muses' temple to it?"[46] Moreover, when the debate turns to a medical topic, it is frequently specified that the interlocutor is a specialist doctor (ἰατρός), or a doctor and his medical entourage.[47] Plutarch thus bestows expert authority on the physician's argument, whilst also signalling that a more 'technical' account is to follow.

But non-medical interlocutors, by which I mean laymen who did not enjoy a proper medical training, also participate in such medical debates, not least Plutarch himself, who often takes a prominent role as an interlocutor.[48] For instance, in *QC* 8.9 doctor Philo calls upon Plutarch to "help in defending the ancient physicians" in showing that new diseases do come into existence and are not just the result of a failure of observation or of nomenclature (as seen

45 Plutarch, *QC* 3.1, 646F: ἀπὸ τῆς ἰατρικῆς.

46 Ibid. 9.14, 744F: τῇ δ' ἡμετέρᾳ τέχνῃ τί παθὼν τὸ Μουσεῖον ἀποκέκλεικας; The question is directed at Plutarch's brother, Lamprias.

47 Interlocutors introduced as ἰατρός include: Trypho (3.1, 646A, 5.8, 683C, 9.14, 744F), Avitus/Athryïtus of Thasos (3.4, 651A; on his name, see Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2764n.14), Zopyrus (3.6, 653C), Moschion (3.10, 658A; also a main character in *De tuenda*), Philo of Hyampolis (4.1, 660D; also 6.2, 687B and 8.9, 731A), Cleomenes (6.8, 694F), and Nicias of Nicopolis (7.1, 698A). In other cases, medical professionalism is rather suggested by the content of the interlocutor's argument (without providing full certainty): e.g., Marcion (suggested by *QC* 4.1, 661A, 662A–664A, quoting Erasistratus' composition of antidotes at 663C, which he called "the hands of god," namely "mineral, vegetable and animal ingredients, the products of both land and sea": see Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 2: 23), and Zeno and Crato (suggested by *QC* 4.4, 669C; see Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 1: 43 but more doubtful in 2: 92); see also the list of names in Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2764–2765. For the 'medical entourage', see, e.g., *QC* 6.2, 687B: οἱ περὶ Φίλων᾽ ἰατροί. It is unclear whether this entourage consisted of doctor Philo's medical colleagues and/or students. At any rate, bringing one's students along to a symposium was not uncommon.

48 Regarding non-medical interlocutors, the situation is similar in Athenaeus, see Flemming, "Physicians at the Feast," 479–481. On Plutarch's self-presentation as interlocutor in the *Table Talk* (in terms of authorial self-promotion/effacement), see Frieda Klotz, "Portraits of the Philosopher: Plutarch's Self-Presentation in the *Quaestiones Convivales*," *The Classical Quarterly*, 57 (2007), 650–667; Jason König, "Self-Promotion and Self-Effacement in Plutarch's *Table Talk*," in Klotz and Oikonomopoulou, *Philosopher's Banquet*, 179–203. Cf. also note 92.

previously, Plutarch ascribes new diseases to the luxurious life-style, δίαιτα, of his time).[49] The otherwise unknown Aristaenetus of Nicaea, to give another example, recites a doctors' recommendation for avoiding hangover, but nothing suggests he was an expert in the field.[50] A logical inference then is that the types of medical sources, concepts and theories under discussion in the *Table Talk* belonged to a more 'popular' or 'common' type of medical knowledge that pertained to the shared intellectual background of the educated elite.

Indeed, as a branch of technical learning, medicine was held in high regard by educated individuals in the High Roman Empire.[51] Sources confirm that acquiring and demonstrating medical knowledge contributed to the formation of a distinct cultural and intellectual identity in such networks. This is exemplified perhaps most clearly by Aulus Gellius' erudite plea in *Attic Nights* 18.10.8 that liberally educated people should acquire a basic notion of medicine and the human body, in view of Roman *humanitas* (which he elsewhere describes as nearly the Roman equivalent of the Greek παιδεία, 'education').[52] These lay individuals belonged to upper-class society and took a primarily intellectual interest in medicine without ever descending to practise, except perhaps on their immediate household (i.e., domestic *Hausvätermedizin*). The existence of such learned laymen and women, including amateur doctors (φιλίατροι), is, in fact, a characteristic that distinguishes Graeco-Roman medicine from that of many other societies.[53]

In his *Learned Banqueters*, Athenaeus too stages doctors as interlocutors at a series of sympotic events, thus providing an interesting parallel for Plutarch's feasts. In comparing the medical content of the *Learned Banqueters* with that of the *Table Talk*, Flemming rightly pointed out that the latter is "more synthetic,

49 Plutarch, *QC* 8.9, 732B: κἀμὲ συνειπεῖν παρεκάλει τοῖς ἀρχαίοις ἰατροῖς.

50 At least, not a medical expert; see *QC* 3.7, 656A, where he refers to medical literature and hearsay.

51 Jouanna, *Hippocrates*, 351–352 gives Plutarch's acquaintance with the Hippocratic corpus as a case in point.

52 See Michiel Meeusen, "Of Veins and Arteries: Medical Vulgarisation in Gellius' *Attic Nights* (18.10)," in *The Words of Medicine: Technical Terminology in Material and Textual Evidence from the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Isabella Bonati (Berlin–New York, forthcoming). Cf. *Noctes Atticae* 13.17.1: "They gave to *humanitas* about the force of the Greek παιδεία that is, what we call 'education and training in the liberal arts' (*eruditionem institutionemque in bonas artes*)."

53 Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 321; Luchner, *Philiatroi*.

even creative, and polished [...] than Athenaeus' assemblage of authorities and quotations."[54] But even so, the sources upon which Plutarch relies are:

> more narrowly medically *mainstream* than Athenaeus, with only Erasistratus (Mor. 663c, 698d, 699a), Philistion of Locri (699c), Hippocrates [682e, 699c] and his pupil Dioxippus/Dexippus (699c) and Asclepiades (731a) referred to at his parties, without the specific citation of works.[55]

Indeed, much of the medical content of the *Table Talk* remains unattributed by the speakers, or is simply ascribed to an anonymous group of ἰατροί.[56] Flemming is right, therefore, that:

> [s]ince these [sc. medical problems in the *Table Talk*] are debates conducted in terms of *basic* physiological and pathological concepts and principles (at least within rationalist medicine), there is no need to reach outside the centre of medical learning, or even to cite names and texts for dealings in such *common currency*.[57]

It can be added that Plutarch at one point cites the *Menoneia*, so there may be reason to assume that he drew his medical knowledge mainly from medical handbooks or doxographies, which he then probably supplemented with the medical materials he encountered on more specific topics, for instance,

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54 Flemming, "Physicians at the Feast," 478. The same counts for Plato's *Symposium* and Macrobius' *Saturnalia*, where medicine also forms an integral part of sympotic discourse (see note 36).

55 Ibid. (my Italics). For further Hippocratic references and quotations in Plutarch, see Rosa M. Aguilar, "Hipócrates en Plutarco," *Cuadernos de filologia clásica*, 4 (1994), 35–45 and Jouanna, *Hippocrates*, 351–352 (with notes).

56 For example, Plutarch, *QC* 3.5, 652F ("physicians use vinous fruits, like pomegranates and apples, for refrigerants more than they use others"), 3.10, 658D ("physicians use a vine-twig fire to heat by degrees decoctions of drugs"), 659C ("bronze-rust is employed by physicians among their drugs [...], and they record that the eyes of men who pass their time in copper-mines are benefited and those who have lost their eyelashes grow them again [...]"). Cf. Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2764n.13: "Plutarque, assez souvent, parle aussi des médecins d'une manière collective et anonyme, sans qu'on puisse savoir s'ils lui sont antérieurs ou contemporains, signifiant ainsi que l'opinion en question atteint chez eux un certain degré d'unanimité." On popular medicine in Plutarch, see Ignacio Rodríguez Alfageme, "Medicina popular en Plutarco," in *Plutarco, Dioniso y el vino*, ed. José Guillermo Montes Cala, Manuel Sánchez Ortiz de Landaluce and Rafael J. Gallé Cejudo (Madrid, 1999), 411–422. On medical lore in Plutarch's *Causes of Natural Phenomena*, see Meeusen, *Plutarch's Science*, 280.

57 Flemming, "Physicians at the Feast," 479 (my italics).

in collections of problems (especially the Aristotelian *Natural Problems*) or in philosophical commentaries (cf., e.g., *QC* 7.1, possibly drawing on a Plato commentary; see further).[58]

6 Medicine as Common Currency

An interesting case to support Flemming's thesis (viz. that the medical knowledge of the *Table Talk* belongs to the common intellectual currency of the time) is provided by *QC* 6.3. In this talk, we find Plutarch debating with his anonymous host about the problem of why hunger is appeased by drinking, but thirst increased by eating. The two previous talks are set at the same sympotic scene and deal with related problems, *QC* 6.1: "Why are those who fast more thirsty than hungry?" and *QC* 6.2: "Whether hunger and thirst are caused by deficiency or by a change in shape of the passages."[59]

Picking up the argument from the previous talk (see further), the host in *QC* 6.3 argues that "those who suppose the existence of passages"[60] most easily and most convincingly solve the problem. But he sneeringly adds that "to be sure, their accounts are often only just plausible," implying that they are not necessarily true (indeed, Plutarch will reject the theory in what follows).[61] These passages or pores (πόροι), so the host specifies, vary in dimension according to the different kinds of matter transported through them (ἄλλας πρὸς ἄλλα συμμετρίας ἐχόντων).[62] The large pores receive both solid and liquid matter, the narrow pores only liquid. Emptiness in the narrow pores causes thirst, in the large pores hunger. Since liquid fills both the narrow and large passages it appeases hunger, whereas solid food, because of its size, fills only the large passages, not the narrow, so that thirst remains.

Plutarch, in turn, agrees that the fact (συμβαῖνον) – i.e., that hunger is appeased by drinking but thirst increased by eating – is clearly true, but disagrees with the proposed explanation, since it does not account for the fact

58 *Menoneia*, quoted in Plutarch, *QC* 8.9, 733C.

59 Plutarch does not provide any contextual information about this symposium. Cf. Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 2: 238: "This series discloses more clearly than other parts of the *Talks* how Plut. used collections of Προβλήματα for his work."

60 Plutarch, *QC* 6.3, 689B: οἱ τοὺς πόρους ὑποτιθέμενοι.

61 I follow the correction and translation of Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 2: 255: εἰ καὶ δὴ (mss: μὴ) πολλὰ μόνον πιθανῶς.

62 As opposed to the Loeb translation ("according to their purpose"), I interpret the πρός as purely prepositional, without the implication of a purposeful adaptation of pores to matter. This aspect of purposefulness – and especially the lack thereof in the case of the *poroi* theory – is precisely what is at stake in the preceding *QC* 6.2 (see further).

that thirst does not simply remain but increases (as mentioned in the initial problem: ἐπιτείνειν συμβαίνει τὸ δίψος). Just like the host, he is not a great enthusiast for the *poroi* theory either. In a playfully critical way, he objects to the theory as follows: "if you were to perforate the flesh [...] with these passages that certain people (ἔνιοι) so fondly cling to and love, you would make it weak, quivering and unsound."[63] As an alternative to the host's *poroi* theory Plutarch will base his explanation on a qualitative-elemental principle (I will revisit this further on). What matters here is that although Plutarch does not mention any authorities by name, his criticism of the ἔνιοι ("certain people", who remain unspecified but are the same as "those who suppose the existence of passages" in the host's argument) seems to be directed, in the first place, against the followers of the second/first-century BCE physician Asclepiades of Bithynia, and more precisely their core doctrine of the perforation of the body with pores of various sizes through which small particles (ὄγκοι) travel continuously; indeed, Asclepiades believed that different pores cause hunger and thirst.[64] Among these *enioi* are also doctor Philo of Hyampolis and his medical entourage (οἱ περὶ Φίλων' ἰατροί), who upheld the same *poroi* theory in the previous talk (*QC* 6.2), set at the same sympotic scene, where they argue that hunger and thirst are caused, not by deficiency, but by a mechanical change in the shape of the passages. As we will see further on, Plutarch, for underlying philosophical reasons, is again very critical of the theory thus propounded.

What matters here is that even though Asclepiades is not mentioned by name in *QC* 6.3, the object under attack is very possibly his *poroi* theory (or that of his school), but also more generally its underlying atomist-materialist worldview (see further). The implication is that the *poroi* theory – and Asclepiades' Democritean/Epicurean approach to medicine more generally – must have been relatively popular in Plutarch's time, to the extent that it did not even require to be name-checked. In other words, it probably belonged to the "common currency" (to use Flemming's words), that is, the common medical

63 Plutarch, *QC* 6.3, 689C: εἰ τοῖς πόροις τούτοις [...] ὧν ἔνιοι περιέχονται καὶ ἀγαπῶσι, κατατρήσειέ τις τὴν σάρκα, πλαδαρὰν καὶ τρομώδη καὶ σαθρὰν ποιήσει.

64 See Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 2: 256 (cf. also 241–243): "This severe criticism is certainly directed against Asclepiades' doctrine of the perforation of the body with pores of various sizes." Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 194 also suggests a Methodist backdrop. For Asclepiades' theory that different pores cause hunger and thirst, see Caelius Aurelianus, *De morbis acutis* 1.14.114. On Asclepiades' theory of matter more generally, see David Leith, "The Qualitative Status of the *Onkoi* in Asclepiades' Theory of Matter," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 36 (2009), 283–320.

conceptual frame of reference with which not only expert physicians but also generally educated laypeople were well acquainted.[65]

A plausible explanation for why Asclepiades' *poroi* theory had become so mainstream in Plutarch's days is the fact that the Methodist school, developed by his followers Themison and Thessalus, became highly popular in the time of the High Roman Empire. Asclepiades himself practised and taught Greek medicine in Rome from 91 BCE. The school's popularity was mainly due to its minimalist theoretical framework and its simplified approach to medicine in general (e.g., by distinguishing only three types of diseases – the fluid, the constipated, and the mixed; and by promising that one could become a doctor within only six months).[66] This attitude was much to the dislike of erudite doctors like Galen, whose fierce critique of Asclepiades, and especially his denial of providence in nature, is well known.[67] As we will see in what follows, Plutarch, as a fellow Platonist, formulated a very similar critique.[68]

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65 Cf. also Senzasono, *Precetti igienici*, 11–13, who argues that the Asclepiadean material from *De tuenda* (especially the concept of πληθώρα) must have been common in contemporary medicine. That Plutarch was probably acquainted with only the bare essentials of the Asclepiadean system, and that he had never actually read his writings, is suggested by the fact that throughout his entire oeuvre he mentions him by name only once, and then obliquely. This fleeting reference is made in a discussion about the problem of new diseases, where he says that Athenodorus in the first book of his *Epidemics* writes that elephantiasis and hydrophobia first made their appearance in the time of Asclepiades (*QC* 8.9, 731A).

66 According to Asclepiades, pathological states are due to the narrowing or the widening of the pores, which makes the particles flow too slowly or too quickly (Caelius Aurelianus, *De morbis acutis* 1.14.106). In his system, the humoral pathology was practically eliminated. This is also true of the doctrines of πνεῦμα (breath) and of ἔμφυτον θερμόν (innate heat); on their organic/instrumental function in Plutarch, see further. The promise that one could become a doctor within six months is ascribed to Thessalus of Tralles by Galen, *De methodo medendi* 1.1 (10.5.2 Kühn).

67 Mario Vegetti, "La polemica di Galeno contro la medicina metodica," *Siculorum Gymnasium*, 33 (1980), 427–435. The Methodists were "possibly a consciously anti-intellectual movement representing a non-elite group in society": Peter N. Singer, "Galen," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/galen/>). For Asclepiades' rejection of teleology in nature, see John T. Vallance, *The Lost Theory of Asclepiades of Bithynia* (Oxford, 1990), 145; cf. idem, "The Medical System of Asclepiades of Bithynia," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, vol. II.37.1, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin–New York, 1993), 693–727, at 703–704.

68 For the "indéniable parenté intellectuelle" between Galen and Plutarch, cf. Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2789.

7 Sect Allegiance

This brings us to a more central issue, the issue of philosophical sect allegiance, which, as I will try to show in the remainder of this contribution, has a seminal structural influence on how medical experts and expertise are treated in the *Table Talk*. As is clear from a number of medical debates, Plutarch's devotion towards Plato has direct repercussions on how he looked at, and what he thought of, doctors and their 'technical' knowledge relating to the human body and its mal/functioning (by which I refer to the distinction between 'technical' and 'philosophical' knowledge, as per the distinction drawn in *On the Principle of Cold* 8, 948BC, discussed in section 3 above).

To stay with the hunger and thirst problems discussed in *QC* 6.1–3, the anti-Asclepiadean stance taken by Plutarch has broader philosophical ramifications. His main criticism in *QC* 6.2 ("Whether hunger and thirst are caused by deficiency or by a change in shape of the passages") is that the *poroi* theory, advocated previously by doctor Philo and his entourage, contradicts the purpose of nature.[69] Plutarch argues that appetite is a means provided to us for our protection and survival: "it is appetite that teaches us to seek and pursue any element wanting in our balance."[70] By contrast, to ascribe appetite simply to the shape of the pores and their mechanical dilating/contracting equates to leaving nature out of the account. As a passionate Platonist who assumes the working of demiurgic providence in the world, Plutarch could not, of course, accept that the aspect of teleology in nature (including in human anatomy and physiology, which belong to the same physical realm)[71] would be excluded, hence his critical stance towards doctor Philo *cum suis*.[72] It should be noted, however, that Plutarch still formulates his criticism in a friendly and courteous way, as he considers the *poroi* argument a "plausible" theory, which is indeed

69 Plutarch, *QC* 6.2, 687D: τῆς φύσεως τέλος.

70 Ibid., 688A: ἡμᾶς δ' ἡ ὄρεξις ζητεῖν διδάσκει καὶ διώκειν τὸ ἐκλεῖπον τῆς κράσεως.

71 Cf. Plutarch, *QC* 8.9, 731CD for the idea that "the body […] is linked with the rest of nature by the bond of common causes" (σώματι […] συνημμένῳ δὲ κοιναῖς πρὸς τὴν φύσιν αἰτίαις). For further detail on the physical basis of medicine in Plutarch, see Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2778–2783 (for metaphysical aspects, see 2783–2788).

72 The same atomist approach is criticised by Diogenianus in Plutarch, *QC* 8.9 (in the problem regarding new diseases), where doctor Philo of Hyampolis is again an interlocutor, and where Plutarch mentions Asclepiades by name (note 65). In addition to his presence as an interlocutor in *QC* 6.2 and 8.9, doctor Philo is also found discussing medical/scientific topics in *QC* 4.1, where he hosts the party (Whether a variety of food is more easily digested than one kind alone), and in *QC* 2.6 (Why the fir and pine and similar trees are not grafted). The theory of pores is also mentioned by doctor Trypho in *QC* 3.1, 647DE (concerning the medicinal properties of flower-garlands).

a polite position to take and at the same time an epistemologically safe one.[73] In concluding his critique, Plutarch even addresses his adversary as "my dearest friend," which in the given context is probably more than just a casual colloquialism.[74] The same critical, yet playful and courteous, tone recurs in the ensuing *QC* 6.3, as is manifested by Plutarch's teasing reference to "these passages that certain people so fondly cling to and love" – as if these people really felt a deeply emotive, erotic affection for their pores.[75]

The main problem with the *poroi* theory and its underlying atomist worldview is that it is too materialistic for Plutarch. It ultimately presumes a world based on the meaningless mechanisms of chance and the clashing of atoms, leaving no space for demiurgic design and divine providence. This remains implicit and between the lines, probably because an open clash of worldviews would neither help solving the problems at hand nor promote sympotic conviviality and community (cf. *koinōnia* above).

In his rebuttal of the host's *poroi* argument in *QC* 6.3, Plutarch bases his explanation on a qualitative-elemental principle, more precisely by emphasising the role of the traditional natural elements and their qualities (fire, air, water, earth; hot, cold, wet, dry). He starts by pointing out that both liquid and solid food are received into the same parts in the body where they are mixed, rather than being filtered and separated as if through a strainer (which would be the case with pores).[76] The admixture (ἀνάμιξις) of liquid breaks up the solid food by means of internal heat and breath (τὸ θερμὸν τὸ ἐντὸς καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα), which Plutarch calls "the most precise instruments of all."[77] In this way, so the argument continues, every particle is rendered adaptable and homogeneous to

73 Cf. ibid. 6.2, 687D: ἐδόκει δή μοι ταῦτα πιθανῶς μὲν ἐπικεχειρῆσθαι. From an epistemological perspective, evaluating the theory as "plausible" (as is done also by the anonymous host in *QC* 6.3; see note 61) is indeed safer than the self-confident attitude with which doctor Philo formulates his argument. Cf. ibid. 6.2, 687D: "This proves conclusively (μάλιστα δῆλόν ἐστιν) that our hunger springs from some modification of the passages and is not caused by deficiency." Similarly, in another context, ibid. 3.3, 650C (Why women are least liable to drunkenness and old men most quickly liable), we read that it is "likely (εἰκὸς) that the female body, on account of the constant drawing down of fluids for menstruation, has come to be provided with many passages (πολύπορον) and cut up as if by dikes and channels."

74 Ibid. 6.2, 688F: ὦ βέλτιστε. Nothing suggests that the element of competition in the debate does any damage to the light-hearted atmosphere of sympotic friendship.

75 Ibid. 6.3, 689C, quoted note 63.

76 This is not strictly in contradiction with Plutarch's own argument ibid. 7.1, 700AB (see below), where he argues that a small amount of liquid is mixed with the solid food that goes to the stomach.

77 Ibid. 6.3, 689D: πάντων ὀργάνων ἀκριβέστατα.

each body part, "not as fitting into vessels and apertures, but as being unified and amalgamated."[78]

Plutarch does not specify what precisely he means by the working of organic/instrumental heat and breath in the breaking up of foods in the stomach, but the allusion is probably to the process of concoction (πέψις), a 'biochemical' process involving elemental qualities (viz. pneumatic heat) as opposed to, say, the mechanical grinding of nourishment by the stomach's peristaltic movement.[79] No further explanation is given for how the process of concoction takes place, but there is reason to assume, as we will see further on, that Plutarch had good epistemological reasons for refraining from doing so in the first place.

His ensuing argument is also qualitative-elemental in kind. Building on his previous hypothesis of *anamixis* of liquid with dry nourishment, he argues, in summary, that solid food, by its dryness, concentrates and draws off moisture, so thirst increases; whereas liquid drenches and dissolves hard remnants of the food, so that they are more easily transported through the body, thus appeasing hunger (Plutarch agrees with Erasistratus that liquid serves as a "vehicle," ὄχημα, for nourishment; see further, note 94).

The emphasis on the 'organic' function of physical breath and heat in the process of digestion (where it is said to dissect mixed nourishment into smaller particles that can be homogenised to the body) is not as innocent as it may at first sight seem. In a closely related and overtly Platonic context in *QC* 7.1 ("Against those who find fault with Plato for saying that drink passes through the lungs"), Plutarch again ascribes an 'organic' role to breath and heat in the same context of digestion (I will revisit this below). Importantly, he there specifies, somewhat in passing, that the exact working of these instruments cannot be explained by human parlance/reasoning (λόγῳ): "the ingenious organisation of nature's activities is beyond the range of words, and it is impossible to explain adequately the exact working of the instruments it employs – that is breath and heat."[80]

78 Ibid.: οὐκ ἐναρμόττον ὥσπερ ἀγγείοις καὶ τρήμασιν ἀλλ' ἑνούμενον καὶ προσφυόμενον. A similar idea is formulated ibid. 4.1, 663AB by the otherwise unknown doctor Marcion (Whether a variety of food is more easily digested than one kind alone).

79 This was rather the opinion of physicians like Asclepiades and Erasistratus. Cf. [Galen], *In Hippocratis de alimento* 15.247 Kühn; [Galen], *Definitiones medicae* 19.372f. Kühn; see Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 2: 257.

80 *QC* 7.1, 699B: ἡ γὰρ φύσις οὐκ ἐφικτὸν ἔχει τῷ λόγῳ τὸ περὶ τὰς ἐνεργείας εὐμήχανον, οὐδ' ἔστι τῶν ὀργάνων αὐτῆς τὴν ἀκρίβειαν οἷς χρῆται (λέγω δὲ τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ θερμόν) ἀξίως διελθεῖν. On the principle of 'unsayability' in the *Medical Puzzles and Natural Problems* of Ps.-Alexander of Aphrodisias, see Meeusen, "Ps.-Alexander of Aphrodisias on Unsayable Properties."

What this seminal passage probably implies – again, between the lines – is that, for underlying epistemological motives, it is impossible to capture in scientific terms the exact way in which nature (and more specifically the process of concoction) actually works. This is because of the divine/demiurgic agencies operative within it, which are not fathomable by human intelligence (an idea that ties in directly with Plutarch's Academic "caution towards the divine," εὐλάβεια πρὸς τὸ θεῖον).[81] In other words, the conceptual framework of natural science is not powerful enough to provide any clarity about how the world is 'organised' by the divine (including the working of 'organic' breath and heat). Plutarch is much more explicit about this elsewhere (viz. about divine interaction in the world), but in the present context he does not go into much detail, probably because this would not lend itself so well to this convivial setting as it would rather to the philosophers' school.[82]

Plutarch uses the same terminology elsewhere in explaining a very different phenomenon, viz. the process of oracular divination. This reference occurs in *On the Obsolescence of Oracles*, where he again ascribes an important 'organic' function to breath (viz. the Delphic *pneuma*), albeit this time in an overtly theological context:

> the fact is we do not make the prophetic art godless or irrational when we assign to it as its material the soul of a human being, and assign the breath of inspiration and the exhalation as instrument or plectrum for playing it.[83]

81 Pierluigi Donini, "Lo scetticismo academico. Aristotele e l'unità della tradizione platonica secondo Plutarco," in *Storiografia e dossografia nella filosofia antica*, ed. Giuseppe Cambiano (Turin, 1986), 203–226, at 208–209: "sono infatti implicite le operazioni della demiurgia che non sono però completamente esplicabili dal discorso umano." Cf. the parallel passage in the context of reproduction in *De amore prolis* 495CD: "For although nature is everywhere exact (ἀκριβὴς) and workmanlike with no deficiency or superfluity, 'and has,' as Erasistratus said, 'no trumpery about her'; yet when it comes to the processes of procreation, it is impossible to describe them in a fitting manner (ἀξίως οὐκ ἔστιν εἰπεῖν), and perhaps it would not be decent to fix our attention too precisely upon the names and designations (τοῖς ὀνόμασι καὶ τοῖς ῥήμασιν) of these forbidden topics, but it is proper that we should apprehend the admirable adaptation of those hidden and concealed parts to the functions of procreation and bringing to birth. However, the production and administering of milk is sufficient proof of nature's foresight and care (τὴν πρόνοιαν αὐτῆς […] καὶ ἐπιμέλειαν) […]."

82 Cf. Plutarch, *QC* 1.1, 614A: "the height of sagacity is to talk philosophy without seeming to do so." For the distinction between the symposium and the school context, see ibid. 7.8, 712A.

83 Plutarch, *De defectu oraculorum* 436F: οὐ γὰρ ἄθεον ποιοῦμεν οὐδ' ἄλογον τὴν μαντικήν, ὕλην μὲν αὐτῇ τὴν ψυχὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου τὸ δ' ἐνθουσιαστικὸν πνεῦμα καὶ τὴν ἀναθυμίασιν οἷον

What this means is that in the oracular-divinatory process too, *pneuma* is instrumentalised by the divine in order to interact/communicate with the physical world. This is in line with Plutarch's well-known dualistic view on causality, where higher/divine causes do not exclude, but go firmly hand in hand with, inferior/natural causes (see note 31). There is much reason to assume, then, that the same idea is subtly implied in the other passages involving 'organic' breath and heat (which form a tight physical unity, as heat can be seen as a qualitative effect of the breath's friction).[84] This in turn underlines Plutarch's firm belief in divine interaction in nature as a whole, including human physiology (viz. the process of digestion). Aristotle had previously underlined the instrumental function of *pneuma* when he wrote that "nature effects almost everything using breath as a tool."[85] He even considered it "analogous to the element of the stars," that is the divine, quintessential *aithēr* (αἰθήρ).[86] What Plutarch does, as a faithful Platonist, is to add an aspect of divine providence to this Aristotelian label.[87]

ὄργανον ἢ πλῆκτρον ἀποδιδόντες. Cf. also *QC* 8.10, 736AB: "It is inevitable, however, that our minds should share the body's experience, and especially that when the vital breath is congealed, the light of divination should be dimmed like a mirror that is fogged." For an excellent study of Plutarch's view of oracular divination and its precise working, see Elsa Giovanna Simonetti, *A Perfect Medium? Oracular Divination in the Thought of Plutarch* (Leuven, 2017), especially 97–105. In the *Table Talk*, *pneuma* plays a key role in several processes relating to human consciousness more generally (and sense perception in particular), cf. *QC* 1.8, 625C, 626C, 4.2, 666AB, 5.7, 681A, 6.8, 695A, 6.10, 696E.

84 For the association of breath and heat in the context of digestion, cf. also Plutarch, *QC* 2.9, 642C, 4.1, 663A, *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* 87B, *De esu carnium* 995A; Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 2: 38.

85 Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* 5.8, 789b8–9: τῷ πνεύματι ἐργάζεσθαι τὰ πολλὰ εἰκὸς ὡς ὀργάνῳ.

86 Ibid. 2.3, 736b37–737a1: ἀνάλογον οὖσα τῷ τῶν ἄστρων στοιχείῳ. This *pneuma* (present in sperm) shares its generative property with *aithēr*.

87 Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 3: 25 also refers to "Aristotle's intricate an ill-defined doctrine of πνεῦμα and innate heat" (in the context of *QC* 7.1, 699B); cf. ibid., 1: 343. The concept was more generally in use in ancient medicine, cf. ibid., 2: 38: "The doctrine of πνεῦμα as a physiological concept derived from the Sicilian medical school (Emped., Philistion), influenced the Coic one and, through the Peripatos and the Stoa, became essential to the Pneumatist school." For a selection of passages involving *pneuma* in Plutarch, see Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2782; see also, more generally, Gérard Verbeke, *L' évolution de la doctrine du pneuma du stoïcisme à Saint Augustin: étude philosophique* (Paris–Louvain, 1945), 260–287.

8 Saving Plato

To return to the epistemological implications of Plutarch's statement quoted above that "the ingenious organisation of nature's activities is beyond the range of words" (*QC* 7.1, 699B), it is well-known that Plato in the *Timaeus* gives probabilistic reasoning an important place within the field of natural philosophy, famously describing Timaeus' account as a "plausible story/myth" (εἰκὼς λόγος and εἰκὼς μῦθος). Accordingly, Plutarch believes that the natural philosopher, in studying natural phenomena, can only formulate plausible opinions that remain essentially uncertain.[88] The *locus classicus* for this is the finale of *On the Principle of Cold*, where Plutarch concludes his inquiry into the principle of cold with the suspension (ἐποχή) of the Academic Sceptics.[89] The same epistemological *caveat* recurs at hand in *QC* 7.1.

The problem here is Plato's contested view, formulated in the *Timaeus*, that drink passes through the lungs.[90] In this talk, we find a most apologetic Plutarch defending Plato against (the otherwise unknown) doctor Nicias of Nicopolis, who levels a charge against Plato for writing "so plainly that what is drunk passes through the lungs that he left no plausible (πιθανὴν) line of argument in his behalf, even for the most zealous to defend him."[91] It comes as no surprise that the issue of plausibility will again play a key role in Plutarch's defence of Plato. But the problem as a whole seems to have wider resonance in the context of the intellectual debate between philosophers and doctors, as per the discussion in section 2 above related to the introduction to the *Precepts*. We will see that Plutarch's ultimate concern is epistemic in kind, reflecting on what is scientifically knowable in the fields of human anatomy and physiology. The fact, moreover, that the doctor (Nicias) speaks first, and the philosopher

88 Cf. Meeusen, *Plutarch's Science*, 312–328.

89 After criticising the theories of the Stoics (who think the principle of cold is air), and Empedocles and Strato (who attribute it to water), Plutarch elaborates his own argument (proposing earth as the most likely candidate). He concludes his study with a direct address to Favorinus of Arelate (the dedicatee), who has to decide himself whether he regards Plutarch's arguments as more plausible or rather prefers to suspend judgement (*De primo frigido* 23, 955C).

90 Plato, *Timaeus* 70c, 91a. For a synopsis of the history of this debate, see Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 3: 16.

91 Plutarch, *QC* 7.1, 698A: ὁ δὲ φιλόσοφος οὑτωσὶ σαφῶς […] γράψας διεξιέναι τὰ ποτὰ διὰ τοῦ πλεύμονος οὐδὲ τοῖς προθυμοτάτοις ἀμύνειν ἐπιχείρησιν ὑπὲρ αὑτοῦ πιθανὴν ἀπολέλοιπεν. From his ensuing argument, scholars have deduced that Nicias was an Erasistratean physician (= fragment 114 Garofalo); see Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 3: 16–17.

(Plutarch) last, has structural significance in the ordering of the explanations and their implied (c.q. increasing) level of plausibility.[92]

Doctor Nicias' critique is fourfold: (1) liquid nourishment is necessarily mixed with the dry, and the stomach serves as a receptacle for both; (2) the barley oats drunk in a *kykeon*[93] cannot pass through the porous surface of the lungs without getting stuck (this was also the objection of Erasistratus); (3) Plato – unphilosophically – disregards the function (χρείαν) of the epiglottis in blocking the windpipe while nourishment is being swallowed; and (4) people who drink slowly have more moisture in their abdomen than those who gulp their drink all at once: in the former, the liquid is mixed with the solid food (thus serving as a "vehicle," ὄχημα, for it, as Erasistratus contended), whereas in the latter, the liquid is thrust straight to the bladder.[94] In support of doctor Nicias' critique, the schoolmaster Protogenes adduces some verses from Homer, who "was the first to have observed that the vessel for our nourishment is the oesophagus (στόμαχος), and for breath the windpipe (βρόγχος), which the ancients called *aspharagus* (ἀσφάραγον)."

According to Teodorsson, the references to Erasistratus in Nicias' critique suggest that Plutarch had "fairly good knowledge" of his (i.e., Erasistratus') teachings more generally.[95] It is not unlikely, however, that he became acquainted with this specific topic (viz. Plato's contested view) via an intermediary source, probably a Plato commentary or doxography.[96] At any rate,

92 The concluding argument in Plutarch's problems is, indeed, often the place for the most plausible and authoritative explanation in the aetiology, without therefore necessarily providing a fully conclusive solution (as is the case here); see Meeusen, *Plutarch's Science*, 88–90. This ranking of opinions may also explain why doctors often speak first and thus least authoritatively, as is the case in the problem at hand and also, e.g., in Plutarch, *QC* 6.2 (not to stray too much further afield). Plato gives fourth rank to the doctor, after the philosopher, king, and political man, but before the diviner, poet and artisan (*Phaedrus* 248de).

93 That is, a mixture of barley oats, grated cheese and wine.

94 In *QC* 6.3, 690A, Plutarch (as an interlocutor) employs the same Erasistratean concept (ὄχημα), which is striking, since in the present talk (*QC* 7.1), he opposes Erasistratus in defending Plato.

95 Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 3: 19 (with further references). On the influence of Hellenistic medicine on Plutarch more generally, see Sabrina Grimaudo, "La medicina ellenistica in Plutarco," in *La biblioteca di Plutarco*, ed. Italo Gallo (Naples, 2004), 417–437; Rosa M. Aguilar, "Plutarco y los médicos helenísticos," in *Plutarco e l'età ellenistica*, ed. Angelo Casanova (Florence, 2005), 417–434; Ignacio Rodríguez Alfageme, "Aspectos de la medicina helenística en Plutarco," in Casanova, *Plutarco e l'età ellenistica*, 435–465.

96 Cf., e.g., the Platonic contents of the *Papyrus Londiniensis* (14.11–18.8; the question about drink passing through the lungs is not mentioned but the text is fragmentary). Aristotle

Plutarch in his defence shows that he was well acquainted with the literature on this topic, as he quotes numerous authorities by name, both literary (Homer, Eupolis, Eratosthenes, Euripides) and medical (Philistion of Locri, Hippocrates, and Dioxippus/Dexippus).

Particularly intriguing is the quote from Euripides – "Wine, traversing the channels of the lungs" – insofar as it occasions Plutarch's introduction of the controversial *poroi* theory into his own defence of Plato, even though he openly rejected it elsewhere (see above).[97] He goes so far as to say that Euripides, the poet, has keener eyes than Erasistratus, the physician: "For he has perceived that the lung has cavities and is pierced with channels (πόροις) through which it transmits liquid." Coming back to Erasistratus' objection about the *kykeon* (in Nicias' second argument), where it was presumed that barley oats get stuck in the porous surface of the lungs, Plutarch adds that they would probably (εἰκός) not be able to pass through the stomach either, since they would likewise get stuck in its irregularly shaped surface, thus rendering the digestion of food impossible. Plutarch's conclusion is therefore straightforward: "neither this account nor the other is quite satisfactory."[98] I take this to mean that the *poroi* theory, although not strictly implausible, does not provide an accurate answer to the problem. In the end, "the ingenious organisation of nature's activities is beyond the range of words," which implies (as we saw) that it leaves out of account the divine instrumentalisation of breath and heat in the process of digestion.

Plutarch does not stop there but concludes by adding his own, personal view on the matter. After having quoted a number of authorities in support of Plato, he adduces a number of arguments from observation: (1) when the windpipe is wounded, liquids are not swallowed; (2) inflammation of the lungs causes excessive thirst; (3) creatures that have no lungs or only small lungs do not drink; and (4) if all dry and liquid nourishment would pass through the stomach, there would be no need for a separate passage for liquid residue, rendering the bladder a useless organ; it is more likely therefore that the bladder

refuted the theory (without naming Plato) in *De partibus animalium* 3.3, 664b4–19, and it is also refuted in the Hippocratic *Diseases* 4.56 (7.604–608 Littré). But the theory that a small portion of the liquid drunk goes to the lungs is defended in the Hippocratic *Heart* 2 (9.81–82 Littré) and *Nature of Bones* 13 (9.184–186 Littré). This is also the theory that Galen proposes in support of Plato: see note 101. *Cf. also* Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 17.11 and Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 7.15.

97 Plutarch, *QC* 7.1, 699C: οἶνος περάσας πλευμόνων διαρροάς (= fragment 983 Nauck).

98 Ibid. 699B: οὔτε τοῦτο λέγειν οὔτ' ἐκεῖνο καλῶς ἔχον ἐστίν.

receives the liquid residue directly from the lungs. Plutarch formulates his own opinion at the very end of his account of the problem:

> What seems likely (ἔοικεν) is that the stomach draws directly from the windpipe a sufficient and moderate quantity of moisture as it passes by, and uses it to soften and liquefy the food, and for that reason produces no liquid residue. And the lung, distributing air and liquid from itself, so to speak, to the parts that need them, excretes the remainder [sc. of the liquid] to the bladder. This [sc. argument of mine] is far more probable (Εἰκότα) than the other accounts. The truth (τὸ δ' ἀληθὲς), however, is doubtless (ἴσως) unattainable in questions of this sort; and it was wrong to make such a rash attack, in a matter which is obscure (πράγματος ἀδήλου) and admits of so many contrary arguments, against a philosopher pre-eminent in reputation and in influence [i.e., Plato].[99]

These concluding comments cast an intriguing light on Plutarch's high opinion of Plato, Platonic doctrine and Platonic epistemology (viz. his 'sceptical' attitude in natural science). They underline Plutarch's philosophical allegiance to Plato as well as his apologetic attitude towards Platonic thought, whilst showing how he deals with knowledge relating to natural phenomena from a Platonist perspective. The passage at hand is, first and foremost, epistemologically motivated, showing that natural science is concerned with plausible arguments (i.e., varying degrees of τὸ πιθανόν/εἰκός) rather than the ultimate truth (τὸ ἀληθές). Plutarch here promotes his own opinion as being more plausible than that of his interlocutors, but in the end, it does not go beyond the realm of plausibility. For Plutarch, however, the intellectual repercussions of this epistemic limitation are not incompatible with his own allegiance to Plato (here and elsewhere). Generally speaking, Platonic doctrine, for him, equals authoritative philosophical orthodoxy which shall not be questioned (unless for clarification, as in the *Platonic Questions*); hence Plutarch's apologetic stance. Despite what Nicias had claimed, there is, according to Plutarch,

99 Ibid. 700AB: ἀλλ' ἔοικεν ὁ μὲν στόμαχος ἐκ τῆς ἀρτηρίας εὐθὺς ἕλκων τοῦ παροδεύοντος ὑγροῦ τὸ ἱκανὸν καὶ τὸ μέτριον ἀποχρῆσθαι πρὸς μάλαξιν καὶ χύλωσιν τῆς τροφῆς, διὸ μηδὲν ὑγροῦ περίττωμα ποιεῖν·ὁ δὲ πλεύμων ὥσπερεὶ τὸ πνεῦμα καὶ τὸ ὑγρὸν ἐξ αὑτοῦ διανέμων τοῖς δεομένοις τὸ λοιπὸν ἐκκρίνειν εἰς τὴν κύστιν. εἰκότα γὰρ μακρῷ ταῦτα μᾶλλον ἐκείνων. τὸ δ' ἀληθὲς ἴσως ἄληπτον ἔν γε τούτοις, καὶ οὐκ ἔδει πρὸς φιλόσοφον δόξῃ τε καὶ δυνάμει πρῶτον οὕτως ἀπαυθαδίσασθαι περὶ πράγματος ἀδήλου καὶ τοσαύτην ἀντιλογίαν ἔχοντος.

"a plausible (πιθανὴν) line of argument" in support of Plato, which is precisely why he feels personally prompted to act as "the most zealous to defend him."[100]

Notably, in his attempt to rescue Plato, Plutarch still admits that a portion of the moisture taken in by drinking is drawn to the stomach to liquefy the food, which in itself is not strictly incompatible with what Plato writes elsewhere in the *Timaeus*, although he does not specify this. Compare Galen's discussion of the topic, where he quotes a number of passages from the *Timaeus* in which it is said that drink as well as food go to the belly.[101] Galen would take Plato to mean that only a small part of the liquid drink goes to the lungs, which is similar to Plutarch's theory, although the latter argues the other way around, that only a small fraction of the drink goes (somehow drawn directly from the windpipe) to the stomach together with the food, while most of the liquid passes through the lungs (which then somehow pass the liquid residue on to the bladder).

The fact that Plutarch, unlike Galen, does not explain *Plato e Platone*, by adducing other passages from the *Timaeus*, can perhaps be explained by the fact that he is extemporising on the spur of the moment (as sympotic protocol demands), so he simply did not remember what Plato had written elsewhere in the *Timaeus*. Then again, he very often elsewhere demonstrates his impressive knowledge of many dialogues of Plato – not just in the great outlines, but also in very specific details – so probably this is not a very plausible explanation. In fact, Plutarch in this passage tacitly follows Plato in disregarding that there is no connection between the lungs and the bladder (nor does he explain how liquid is drawn directly from the windpipe to the stomach).[102] He could not of course adduce Plato's opinion *nominatim* on this matter as it would probably have exacerbated the problem; in any case, it is Plato's authority that is at stake here. It is not impossible, then, that Plutarch did not want to go into too much philological detail (this would probably have been too pedantic for the occasion) or worse still, to give the impression that Plato was inconsistent on the matter (even if, strictly speaking, this was not necessarily the case, as Galen tries to show). At the very least, Plato was not clear about this issue, but since, according to Plutarch, the matter itself is obscure (cf. πράγματος ἀδήλου), Plato himself should not incur too much censure on that account.

100 There is no reason to doubt that Plutarch's defence of Plato's opinion in *QC* 7.1 is sincere, as is shown by the parallel account in *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 1047CD, where he attacks Chrysippus (*SVF* 2, fragment 763) who had rejected it. Cf. Teodorsson, *Commentary*, 3: 22–23.

101 *Galen, De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* 8.9 (= 5.713–719 Kühn = 721–728 Mueller = 532.26–538.12 De Lacy), referring to Plato, *Timaeus* 70de, 72e–73a, 78ab, 78e–79a.

102 Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 91a, rejected by Aristotle, *De partibus animalium* 3.3, 664b10.

This is probably why, in the finale of *QC* 7.1, Plutarch shifts the debate from a purely doctrinal to a more epistemological level, frankly admitting that in 'obscure' matters relating to natural science the truth cannot be attained, not even by the most reputable of philosophers. For Plutarch, this is precisely what Plato's *Timaeus* is actually all about. At the same time, lifting the debate to an epistemological level, away from matters of philosophical orthodoxy/dogmatism, is a smart move to thus defuse the situation and avoid a full-on *querelle des philosophes et médecins*. But it is also a far more constructive and polite approach – indeed, it is truly 'convivial' – compared to Galen's more hostile attitude: "those who thought him so stupid (ἀνόητον) as to suppose that all drink is conveyed into the lungs must themselves rather be reproached (ἐγκαλεῖσθαι) for their misrepresentation."[103]

9 Conclusion

Ultimately, what the *Table Talk* shows us – in an idealised and literary rather than purely historical and factual way – is how doctors actively participated in high society meetings, sharing their own professional knowledge whilst also demonstrating their broader culture and education to their peers. Plutarch's descriptions give us a good idea of what kind of situations a doctor could find himself in when attending a symposium or dinner party where philosophers and other educated people were also in attendance. Indeed, as we read in the *Precepts of Healthcare*, medicine, for Plutarch, is "inferior to none of the liberal arts in subtlety, acuteness, and the pleasure which it yields," but this does not necessarily imply that he is willing to go so far as to include the art of healing among these liberal arts (as doctors like Galen would).[104] If needed, the philosopher Plutarch will make it very clear what is the doctor's intellectual place at table, especially if their views are incompatible with his own Platonism. From a methodological perspective, medical knowledge (like any scientific knowledge relating to natural causes) surely does play an important role in the

103 *Galen, De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* 8.9.20 (= 5.718 Kühn = 726–727 Mueller = 536.27–30 De Lacy).

104 Quoted in note 6. Cf. Galen, *Protrepticus* 14 (1.37–39 Kühn). I am inclined to follow the (exclusive) reading of Boulogne, "Plutarque et la médecine," 2772. Yet the passage in question can be translated in two ways: "among the liberal arts medicine is inferior to none in refinement, excellence, and pleasure," or "medicine is inferior to none of the liberal arts in refinement, excellence, and pleasure." The difference of interpretation depends only on whether the partitive genitive τῶν ἐλευθερίων τεχνῶν is taken with ἰατρική or with οὐδεμίας (see Senzasono, *Precetti igienici*, 144–145n.6). The ambiguity may have been intentional.

sympotic debates, but its 'technical' approach remains inferior to Plutarch's higher 'philosophical' aspirations. There certainly is much interest in the 'technical' medical specifics of the problems under discussion, but more than once Plutarch implies, between the lines, that there are issues of higher 'philosophical' relevance (concerning ethics, scientific method, worldview). Indeed, lifting the debate to a higher philosophical level does make it more generally accessible to non-experts – which is in line with the social protocols of sympotic community (κοινωνία). But nowhere does Plutarch make the debates overtly philosophical either, as it is not his intention to turn the symposium into a philosophical lecture hall (see note 82). Arguably, it is precisely this aspect of convivial community, and the doctors' share in it, which explains why Plutarch formulates his criticism always in a courteous and friendly way, and which makes the *Table Talk*, and the festive events described therein, stand out from an otherwise highly polemical intellectual scene that characterises so much of High Imperial writing, medical or otherwise.

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