

**CHANCE (τύχη), FATE (εἰμαρμένη),  
'WHAT DEPENDS ON US' (τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν) AND  
PROVIDENCE (πρόνοια) IN PLUTARCH'S  
QUAESTIONES CONVIVALES\***

Rodolfo Lopes\*\*

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9675-4023>

[rodolfo.nunes.lopes@gmail.com](mailto:rodolfo.nunes.lopes@gmail.com)

**RESUMO** *Entre os vários problemas filosóficos discutidos ao longo das Quaestiones Convivales (QC) de Plutarco, um deles tem que ver com a origem e com a estrutura do universo, isto é, discussões de cariz cosmológico. Seria impossível comentar em detalhe todas as passagens do tratado sobre questões cosmológicas. Por isso, preferi limitar a análise aos conceitos de acaso (τύχη), destino (εἰμαρμένη), 'o que depende de nós' (τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν) e providência (πρόνοια). O meu objetivo é explicar estes conceitos nas QC e deles inferir uma doutrina cosmológica.*

**Palavras-chave** *Acaso, destino, 'o que depende de nós', livre-arbítrio, providência, Plutarco.*

**ABSTRACT** *One of the many philosophical issues discussed throughout Plutarch's Quaestiones convivales (QC) has to do with the origin and inner structure of the universe, i.e., cosmological discussions. It would be impossible to discuss in detail every passage of the treatise that deals with cosmological issues. Therefore, I chose to limit my analysis to the concepts of chance (τύχη), fate (εἰμαρμένη), 'what depends on us' (τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν), and providence (πρόνοια).*

\* Article submitted on 13/09/2019. Accepted on 29/10/2019.

\*\* Universidade de Brasília. Brasília, DF, Brasil.

*My purpose is to explain these concepts in the QC and to extract from them a cosmological doctrine.*

**Keywords** *Chance, Fate, 'What Depends on us', Free-Will, Providence, Plutarch.*

## 1. Introduction

The *Quaestiones convivales*, or Συμποσιακά, are the longest work among the group of treatises known as *Moralia*.<sup>1</sup> This treatise belongs to an ancient literary genre that had strong sociological connotations. Ever since the Homeric Poems, many ancient Greek authors, from Archaic poets to Attic writers (including those that imitated them in the following centuries), composed what we now call *symptotic works*. Either fictional or historical (or both), these texts aimed to represent the social institution of conversation while drinking wine.<sup>2</sup> Plato's *Symposium* is surely the most famous example, and it also represents a paradigm shift on this genre.<sup>3</sup> As Xenophontos (2016, p. 173) rightly puts it, the symptotic works before Plato used to represent the symposium as a microcosm of a civilised society, its main themes being the right moral principles and patterns of ethical behaviour. After Plato, this kind of works tend to include philosophical discussions, because the symposium was a good example of how philosophical training could be achieved.

The best way to introduce the *QC* is to refer to the contents of its own and inner introduction: the so-called *proemium* (612C-E). The main theme of this section is memory, namely if it is worth to remember what happened during a symposium. Plutarch begins his treatise commenting the popular saying 'I dislike a drinking-companion with a good memory' (612C1: 'μισέω μνάμονα συμπόταν')<sup>4</sup>. His conclusion is that it is wise to forget all the foolish things (612D7: τῶν μὲν ἀτόπων ἢ λήθη τῷ ὄντι σοφῇ), but, as many philosophers before him did (he quotes Plato, Xenophon and many others), it is also useful to collect and register the 'learned discussions' they had during drinking (612E2-5: ἀναγράψασθαι λόγους παρὰ πότον γενομένους ... φιλολογηθέντων συναγαγεῖν).

1 Pages 612-748 (the whole vol. VIII) in the Stephanus edition. From now on, the *Quaestiones convivales* will be referred as *QC*. For a global analysis and bibliography on this treatise vide Ferreira *et al.* (2009); Klotz & Oikonomopoulou (2011).

2 For a general view on the *symposion* as a social institution vide Murray (1990); Orfanos & Carrière (2003); Hobden (2013).

3 On symptotic works before Plato vide Bowie (1993); and Romeri (2002) on works after Plato.

4 The author of this sentence is unknown. It probably was a popular saying.

If we take Plutarch's words seriously, we should assume that these discussions really happened; some of them in Rome with his friend Sosius Senecius (to whom the *QC* are dedicated), others in Greece (612E3-4: πολλάκις ἔν τε Ῥώμῃ μεθ' ὑμῶν καὶ παρ' ἡμῖν ἐν τῇ Ἑλλάδι). This is also relevant to the textual and literary status of the treatise. It is not a transcription of a specific symposium. It is instead a set of discussions that Plutarch himself collected from several symposia where he was drinking and talking with his friends. Yet, this does not mean that Plutarch's views overcome the opinions of the other participants nor that all his friends have similar views. As Brenk (2009, p. 51) puts it, 'His *Symposiacs* are a good example of lively discussions of different opinions among many speakers, often without necessarily indicating his own belief.'<sup>5</sup> I must say that I partially agree with Brenk, since in most cases Plutarch remains silent. But this is not true whenever key philosophical concepts or doctrines are being discussed. The best example is his full rejection of Epicureanism: even if his Epicurean friend Boetus is entitled to put forth his views, they are always refuted either by Plutarch himself or by his fellow platonists.

As such, the treatise contains an extremely wide variety of subjects thoroughly dissected through nine books of discussion. Plutarch's intention in the *QC* was clearly to set forth a group of educated men discussing at the table under a model of conversation based on ethical criteria that would maintain the environment of mutual respect and politeness.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the high cultural level of the participants offered the possibility to discuss, among many things, philosophical questions, problems and doctrines. It should be noted that the first πρόβλημα of this treatise is "If we should philosophize while drinking". Among Attic and Atticist writers, the *incipit* is normally about a key-theme, i.e. about a subject that has to do with the entire work. This clearly sets out the scope of the work not only on the centrality of philosophical discussions, but also on the necessity of different opinions to discuss.<sup>7</sup> Not only as subject of discussion, but also as method to discuss, philosophy is present throughout the several symposia in a very diffuse way,<sup>8</sup> placing the *QC* far closer from

5 On this subject vide Ferrari (1995, pp. 30-31); Martín García (1987, pp. 12-14).

6 Apud L. Van Der Stockt (2000, pp. 93-94).

7 On these subjects, vide Xenophonos (2016, pp. 179-181).

8 On this subject see Kechagia (2011); Lopes (2009).

Plato and Xenophon's works<sup>9</sup> than from the other kind of symposia defined by a spirit of amusement.<sup>10</sup>

One of the many philosophical issues discussed at the table has to do with the origins and inner structure of the universe, i.e., cosmological discussions. It would be impossible to discuss in detail every passage of the *QC* that deals with cosmological issues. I chose to limit my analysis to the concepts of chance (τύχη), fate (εἰμαρμένη), 'what depends on us' (τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν), and providence (πρόνοια). Given the limitations of space, I will not provide a theoretical discussion of these concepts. Not even I intend to interpret them throughout Plutarch's works.

Yet, the expression τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν, which I translate 'what depends on us', deserves further explanation. Many authors from Plutarchean scholarship translate it as 'free-will', but I find that quite problematic. It is well known the *vexata quaestio* on the 'origins' of the concept of free-will, namely the quarrel between Dihle, who says that the notion of will was invented by Augustine,<sup>11</sup> and Frede, to whom the concept of free-will emerges in Stoicism, namely with Epictetus.<sup>12</sup> I find it really difficult to determine who invented a certain concept, and I have serious doubts that philosophical concepts can be 'invented'. Besides, these 'creationistic' approaches seem to suffer from a problem of circularity, given that concepts such as 'free-will', or even 'free' or 'will', are not self-evident. Whenever one tries to point out the 'invention' of one of them, one is retroactively projecting his own preconception. In order to avoid problems of circularity and anachronism, I chose to translate the expression τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν in the most literal possible way and having in mind the context where it occurs for the first time. On this matter, Aristotle is our primary source. When discussing the ethical concept of 'choice' or 'deliberation' (προαίρεσις), at *Ethica Nicomachea* III.2, he says that 'choice seems to relate to the things that depend on us'.<sup>13</sup> These 'things that depend on us' are τὰ ἐφ' ἡμῖν. Actually, a literal translation would be 'that on us', but it would sound unintelligible. Since the scope of προαίρεσις, according to Aristotle, is 'things that we believe

9 This affiliation is stated by Plutarch himself, when, in the *Proemium*, refers some philosophers that had composed sympotic works (612E; for further discussion vide Teodorsson, 1989-1996, *ad loc*; Vetta, 2000, p. 222). On the philosophical nature of the QC, see Klotz (2007, esp. pp. 650, 653); Romeri (2002, pp. 109-sqq.).

10 The symposia directed to amusement and satire are those of Lucian of Samosata and of Athenaeus. On the relation between these sympotic works and Plutarch's vide Romeri (2002).

11 Dihle (1982, p. 123: 'the notion of will, as it is used as a tool of analysis and description in many philosophical doctrines from the early Scholastics to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, was invented by St Augustine').

12 We may see this as a quarrel, because Frede's book (2011) is intended to refute Dihle's thesis (pp. 5-6 of the Introduction are quite explicit on that purpose).

13 *EN* 1111b30: ἡ προαίρεσις περὶ τὰ ἐφ' ἡμῖν εἶναι.

to happen because of us',<sup>14</sup> 'what depends on us' is a fair translation of τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν. For what it's worth, Aristotle also adds that προαίρεσις is something that we do voluntarily/willingly (ἐκούσιον).<sup>15</sup> This could allow us to question the alleged absence of will or free-will before Augustine or the Stoics. But that would lead us to a discussion impossible to deal with, given the focus and limits of these pages.

## 2. Chance (τύχη)

Whenever this concept is introduced in the discussion to explain something, it is immediately refuted. This was absolutely expected, given Plutarch's rejection of Epicurean doctrines.<sup>16</sup> When, during a discussion on the use of flowers during the symposium, it is argued that their only natural purpose is to produce visual and olfactory pleasure, it is not implied the Epicurean doctrine of ἡδονή as τέλος.<sup>17</sup> According to Erato (a friend of Plutarch), flowers produce pleasure only because they were created with that particular purpose:

[...] ἐν γὰρ αὐτὸ δοκεῖ τούναντίον, εἰ μηδὲν ἢ φύσις, ὡς ὑμεῖς φατε, μάτην πεποίηκε, ταῦτα τῆς ἡδονῆς πεποιήσθαι χάριν, ἃ μηδὲν ἄλλο χρήσιμον ἔχοντα μόνον εὐφραίνειν πέφυκεν. (646C3-5)

[...] for I think, on the contrary, that if nature has made nothing in vain (as you claim, I believe), it is for pleasure's sake that she has made what by their nature only serve to delight us and possess no other useful quality.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of being defined by chance, the structure of the natural world is pre-determined, each one of its elements having a specific role and purpose: everything functions the way it is supposed to function. Even the simplest attribute, like the fact that flowers are pleasant, has a reason to be just as it is. Later, on the third question of Book VIII, when the participants discuss the reason why sounds are clearer in the night, Ammonius, the first to speak,

14 EN 1111b25-26: προαιρείται [...] ὅσα οἶεται γενέσθαι ἂν δι' αὐτοῦ.

15 For further discussion vide Taylor (2006, *ad loc*).

16 However, he does not seem to fully reject chance (τύχη). According to Brenk (1977, p. 154), Plutarch assigns a significant role to the concept when he is on strictly historical grounds; on the other hand, he criticizes it on philosophical grounds given its association with Epicureanism. Torraca (1996) argues that the concept of τύχη has a fundamental role together with φύσις in the *De fortuna Romanorum* (pp. 136-140) and with ἀρετή in *De Alexandri magni fortuna aut virtute* (pp. 147-149). On Plutarch's reading of Epicureanism vide Boulogne (1986) and Kechagia-Ovseiko (2014) for a general interpretation (in both cases, the conclusion is that Plutarch disagrees with the general principles of Epicureanism); Montiel (2010) for Plutarch's critique of Epicureanism as a form of atheism.

17 See e.g. D.L. 10.128-129.

18 All translations of the QC are from the *Loeb Classical Library* with slight modifications.

provides a similar explanation, saying that providence contrived accuracy to hearing to compensate for the limitations of vision (720D). Immediately Boetus (an Epicurean<sup>19</sup>) rejects this position and explains this strange physical mystery with a quotation of Epicurus: “what is moves in what is not”.<sup>20</sup> Alluding to the atomistic axiom according to which “what is” (τὸ ὄν) corresponds to the completeness of matter (τὸ πλήρες) and “what is not” (τὸ μὴ ὄν) is “the void” (τὸ κένον),<sup>21</sup> Boetus argues that during the night atoms are extremely compressed and there is more unoccupied space through which the sounds travel (720F-721D). Plutarch himself fiercely objects to this analysis, claiming that sounds result from striking of bodies in the air – a position also held by Plato<sup>22</sup> and Aristotle<sup>23</sup> –, but the discussion only reaches an end with a further refutation added by Thrasyllus (son of Ammonius). He says that it is an error to search for causes other than Zeus himself (722D).

A superficial reading of these passages may suggest a Stoic understanding of the sensible world<sup>24</sup>. The apparently determinist description of the purpose of flowers, the use of the term πρόνοια in Ammonius’ speech, or even Zeus as a ruler of the universe<sup>25</sup> summon the concept of fate as cosmological principle. However, a closer look will prevent that interpretation.

In the first passage, it is suggested that the natural processes are determined to occur, but it is also clear the idea that they obey a higher principle. When Erato says that “nature has made nothing in vain” (646C4-5: μηδὲν ἢ φύσις [...] μάτην πεποίηκε), he’s quoting, almost *ipsis verbis*, a passage from Aristotle’s *De Anima*: “nature does nothing in vain, for everything by nature is for the sake of something” (434a31-32: μηθὲν μάτην ποιεῖ ἢ φύσις. ἔνεκά του γὰρ πάντα ὑπάρχει τὰ φύσει).<sup>26</sup> Thus, besides rejecting that phenomena happen in vain (μάτην), this intertextual connection highlights an affiliation with the Aristotelian theory of natural teleology that surpasses the Stoic conception of pure necessity and inevitability. All things happen not only because they are

19 Boetus was one of Plutarch's oldest friends. He is known as 'the Epicureanist' throughout Plutarch's work, including the *QC* (e.g. *Pyth. or.* 5, 396 E; *QC V* 1, 673 C).

20 720F3: Φέρεται τὰ ὄντ' ἐν τῷ μὴ ὄντι. Boetus' quotation is the only *testimonium* for this Epicurean fragment. Usener (1887, fr. 323) accepts its authenticity, but neither Bailey (1926), Arrighetti (1960) nor Long & Sedley (1987) include it in their editions.

21 Cf. e.g. DK67A6 / LM27 D31, R38 = Arist. *Metaph.* 985b4-sqq.; DK68A37 / LM27 D29 = Simp. *in Cael.* VII.294.33-sqq.; Lucr. I.420-421.

22 See *Ti.* 67b. On Plutarch's reading of Platonism vide Dillon (1996; 2014); Jones (1916).

23 See *de An.* 419b4-420a2. On the peripatetic trends and themes throughout the *QC* vide Oikonomopoulou (2011). On Plutarch's reading of Aristotle and the Peripatetic tradition vide Babut (1996); Becchi (2014).

24 On Plutarch's views of Stoicism vide Babut (1969); Hershbell (1992); Opsomer (2014).

25 The Stoic association of Zeus with the government of the universe is noticed by Plutarch in *De Stoic. rep.* 1056B (= *SVF* II.997).

26 Aristotle states this principle also in *Cael.* 290a31, *GA* 744a36-37, *Ph.* 197b22-29.

meant to happen, but also – and mainly, I would add – due to the sake of the best purpose.<sup>27</sup>

These principles also apply to the animal realm, including humans, considering not only the way they interact with nature, but also their inner structure. In a πρόβλημα on human anatomy, in which it is discussed whether drink passes through the lung or not, Plutarch himself concludes with the following explanation:

[...] ὅσοις πλεύμων οὐκ ἐμπέφυκε τῶν ζώων ἢ σφόδρα μικρὸς ἐμπέφυκε, ταῦτ' οὐ δεῖται ποτοῦ τὸ παράπαν οὐδ' ὀρέγεται, διὰ τὸ τῶν μορίων ἐκάστῳ σύμφυτον ὑπάρχειν τὴν πρὸς τοῦργον ἐπιθυμίαν, οἷς δ' οὐκ ἔστι μόρια, μηδὲ χρεῖαν παρῆναι μηδὲ προθυμίαν τῆς δι' αὐτῶν ἐνεργείας. (699E6-F1)

[...] the creatures to whom nature has not given a lung, or has given only a very small one, do not need to drink at all, and feel no desire for it, because a natural concomitant of each organ is the desire directed toward fulfilment of its function, and creatures that do not have certain parts have neither a need for them nor any eagerness for the activity that employs them.

This exposition requires a further explanation. The title of this πρόβλημα is “Against those who censured Plato for having said that drinking passes through the lung”. The Platonic passage at stake is *Timaeus* 70c-d, but the participants never refer to the dialogue. After a wide discussion on the subject, which was full of quotations from several Greek poets and philosophers, Plutarch interrupts with a fierce “enough of witnesses!” (699D9-10: μαρτύρων μὲν οὖν ἄλις) and provides the final explanation. It is one of the few moments throughout the *QC* where the author Plutarch extends its authority to his corresponding character.

His explanation also depends on several passages of the *Timaeus* which he neither quotes nor refers to. First of all, he's assuming one general principle which was established in the beginning of the dialogue: the world was created without hands or feet since it would not need to walk nor grab something (33d). He seems also taking in account the last pages of the dialogue (90e-sqq.), where Timaeus describes the elements and organs that each animal species receives according to their biological needs. The same principle applies inversely: they will only have need of things that can be received by one of their inborn organs. According to the general principle stated at 33b, the structure of the natural elements must correspond exactly to their congenital functions – no more, no less. Plutarch's final explanation to this πρόβλημα depends entirely on these passages of the *Timaeus*, even if he never refers to the dialogue.

27 See Arist. *EN* 1099b-21-22; *GA* 738a37-b1; *PA* 645a-23-25. On Aristotelian natural teleology see further in Johnson (2005, pp. 80-82); Brodie (2007, pp. 85-100).

### 3. Fate (εἰμαρμένη) and ‘what depends on us’ (τὸ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν)

In the ninth πρόβλημα of Book VIII, the participants debate if it is possible to consider the generation of new diseases. Most of them believed that this was not possible, claiming that nature is not a “lover of novelty” (731B7: φιλόκαινον) nor a “producer of new things” (731B7-8: νέων πραγμάτων δημιουργόν), but the discussion goes on anyway. The first speaker argues that the only way to accept the generation of new diseases was to admit the introduction of elements (such as a new kind of air or a strange type of water) from other worlds or ‘interworlds’ (731D8-9: ἐξ ἐτέρων τινῶν κόσμων ἢ μετακοσμίω). After a long discussion, this atomistic proposition<sup>28</sup> is promptly criticized by Plutarch himself, who does not accept the existence of an infinite number of worlds, because indetermination and undefinition are adverse to the natural order of the universe (732E8: τὸ παρὰ τὴν φύσιν εὐθὺς ἀόριστον καὶ ἄπειρόν ἐστιν).<sup>29</sup> However, the fact that the world is ordered does not imply that all the combinations between its elements are pre-determined and that it is not possible to generate new ones. Plutarch rather thinks that the multiple mixing of so many properties in different degrees may generate new diseases; he gives the example of food and drink as a source of variations in different qualities and arrangements (733A-B). The ‘gastronomic’ *exemplum* is reinforced with a logic counterpart: according to Chrysippus, the number of compound propositions that can be made from only ten simple propositions exceeds a million;<sup>30</sup> according to Xenocrates, the number of syllables which the letters will make in combination is 1.002.000.000.000.<sup>31</sup> This means that men have the ability to recreate some natural processes, since they are free to combine some elements and generate new things that will affect them. This entails a margin of human agency in the natural realm: even if men cannot create new substances, they can produce new things through the combination of pre-existing elements.

28 The existence of other worlds was initially proposed by Leucippus (DK67A24 / LM27R86 = Aët. 1.4.1-sqq.; D.L. 10.88-sqq.) and Democritus (DK68A40 / LM27 P7, P18, D81, D92 = Hippol. *Haer.* 1.13) and adopted by Epicureanism (Epicur. *Ep. Hdt.* 45 = D.L. 10.45).

29 In *De def. orac.* 423C, the infinity of worlds is criticized on the ground that it would lead to the supremacy of chance (τύχη) in the universe. See further in Dillon (1996, pp. 224-225).

30 732F5-7: καὶ Χρυσίππος τὰς ἐκ δέκα μόνων ἀξιωματῶν συμπλοκάς πλήθει φησὶν ἑκατὸν μυριάδας ὑπερβάλλειν: This very same wording is repeated at *De stocorum repugantiis* 1047C. These texts are the only sources for Chrysippus’ frg. 210 (vide SVF II.210, p. 69).

31 733A1-4: Ξενοκράτης δὲ τὸν τῶν συλλαβῶν ἀριθμόν, ὃν τὰ στοιχεῖα μιγνύμενα πρὸς ἄλληλα παρέχει, μυριάδων ἀπέφηνεν εικοσάκις καὶ μυριάκις μυρίων. This is Xenophanes’ frg. 11 according to the edition by Heinze (1892).



There is another passage in the *QC* (740B-D) that focuses the preponderance of human agency. The title of the πρόβλημα (the fifth of Book IX) is 'Why did Plato say that the soul of Ajax came twentieth to the drawing of lots?'. The subtext is, evidently, the so-called Myth of Er with which Plato concludes the *Republic*; and surely one of his *locus classicus* to discuss human responsibility. After a jesting initial discussion, Lamprias (Plutarch's brother) provides an explanation of the casting of lots by the souls that a modern Platonist will find extremely awkward, since it implies an allegedly platonic theory of three causes (740C): fate (εἰμαρμένη), chance (τύχη) and “what depends on us” (τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν):

ἀεὶ μὲν γὰρ ἄπτεται τῶν τριῶν αἰτιῶν, ἅτε δὴ πρῶτος ἢ μάλιστα συνιδῶν, ὅπη τὸ καθ' εἰμαρμένην τῷ κατὰ τύχην αὐθίς τε τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἑκατέρῳ καὶ συναμφοτέροις ἐπιμίγνυσθαι καὶ συμπλέκεσθαι πέφυκε. (740C6-10)

He [*Plato*] always makes use of three causes, for was him who first or best perceived how, by nature, what has to do with fate mingles and interweaves with what has to do with chance, and what depends on us with each of those singly or with both simultaneously.

Allegedly platonic, because Plato did not postulate it, at least, not intentionally. The only passage from the *Dialogues* in which one can find a tripartite model of causality would be *Laws* 768b-c, where the Athenian Stranger says that the only things<sup>32</sup> that direct human affairs (τὰνθρώπινα διακυβερνῶσι) are a god (θεός), chance and opportunity together with the god (μετὰ θεοῦ τύχη καὶ καιρός), or all of these combined with a technique or skill (συγχωρῆσαι τούτοις δεῖν ἔπεσθαι τέχνην). Even if it is tempting to point at this passage as the source of Lamprias' explanation, the only elements that both texts have in common is the use of a tripartite model to explain causality and the idea that causes tend to act simultaneously. One also may relate Plato's τύχη καὶ καιρός with Plutarch's τύχη, but that cannot be extended to the other elements. Not only θεός and τὸ καθ' εἰμαρμένην are completely different things, but also Plato could have used ἡ εἰμαρμένη (e.g. *Phd.* 115a; *Grg.* 512e) instead of θεός and Plutarch could have used θεός instead of τὸ καθ' εἰμαρμένην. As for the identification of Plato's τέχνη with Plutarch's τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν, it would also be exaggerated: not only the expression τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν can refer to a wide variety of phenomena (specially ethical ones) that are not comprised by τέχνη, but it

32 I use 'things', because in Plato's text there is no word or expression like αἴτιον, αἰτία, διὰ + accusative or causal dative, or any other that Plato uses to express the idea of cause (vide Sedley, 1998, pp. 114-116).

also occurs for the first time in Aristotle. That is probably why some authors suggest<sup>33</sup> a line from *Ethica Nicomachea* as source of this passage:

αἰτίαι γὰρ δοκοῦσιν εἶναι φύσις καὶ ἀνάγκη καὶ τύχη, ἔτι δὲ νοῦς καὶ πᾶν τὸ δι' ἀνθρώπου. (1112a32-33)

Nature, necessity, and chance are thought to be causes, and also intellect and everything that depends on man.

This hypothesis is more interesting from a terminological standpoint, since ἀνάγκη can easily be identified with τὸ καθ' εἰμαρμένην, and νοῦς καὶ πᾶν τὸ δι' ἀνθρώπου may correspond to τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν; besides the repetition of τύχη and the specification that these elements are αἰτίαι. Yet, Aristotle (as usual) uses a quadripartite model, not a tripartite one. Besides, the discussion is on a specific passage of Plato's *Republic* and the participants never quote nor refer to Aristotle. A plausible answer would be that perhaps Plutarch has in mind both texts (*Laws* 768b-c and *EN* 1112a32-33). Not only the authors of Late Antiquity, unlike modern scholars, did not see Plato and Aristotle as antagonists, but it also was normal to use ancient sources without explicit citation.

Leaving aside these difficulties, let's get back to Lamprias' interpretation of the Platonic text. The previous passages allow us to assume that (1) none of these causes acts by itself, i.e. without being mingled with other cause; (2) fate and chance always act simultaneously; (3) what depends on us is always mingled with chance, fate or both. But in the subsequent lines, Lamprias suggests that fate is somehow submitted to 'what depends on us', saying that the "good life of those who choose correctly" (740D3: τὸ δ' εὖ βιοῦν τοὺς ὀρθῶς ἐλομένους) is connected/bound (740D4: συνάπτων) with the "necessity of fate" (740D4: εἰμαρμένης ἀνάγκη). If fate determines a good or a bad life depending on a previous conduct defined by our personal choices,<sup>34</sup> what exactly is fate? In the end, if it is pre-determined by an earlier kind of independent 'what depends on us', fate is nothing but the final sum of our intentional decisions.<sup>35</sup> As for chance, the problem is similar: first, Lamprias identifies it with external factors, like the educational and political background we live in, that do not depend on us, but are determined by a casual casting of lots (740D5: τῶν κλήρων ἀτάκτως διασπειρομένων). But right after, he adds that the casting of lots does not happen by chance (740D10: οὐκέτι γίνεται κατὰ τύχην), but from a sort of

33 Vide Dillon (1996, p. 209); Teodorsson (1989-1996, *ad loc.*).

34 Brenk (1977, p. 155) also shares this opinion.

35 There is a similar definition of εἰμαρμένη in *De Fato* (570) that also includes providence. The problem is that this work is considered apocryphal. See further details in Froidefond (1987, p. 226).

fate and providence (740D10-11: ἀλλ' ἕκ τινος εἰμαρμένης καὶ προνοίας). Thus, if fate is the sum of our intentional actions, and, at the same time, determines the casting of lots, fate and chance are nothing but a consequence of 'what depends on us' and not its cause. However, this interpretation only makes sense if we have in mind the context of the platonic hypotext, meaning that the three causes only apply to a circular conception of life. That inevitable connection is quite evident for two reasons. First, Lamprias is always speaking for Plato.<sup>36</sup> Second, Plato's text suggests the very same idea: "responsibility is on the one who chooses" (R. 617e4: αἰτία ἐλομένου).

As we have seen, Lamprias' speech also includes the concept of providence, but it does not give further notice on its implications. We notice that, together with fate, it determines the casting of the lots, but, on the other hand, it is not included in the group of the three causes. For that reason, it is tempting to merge it with fate, claiming a Stoic influence in this passage.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, it is equally dangerous, given the critiques that Plutarch directs towards Stoic providence for the determinism it entails.<sup>38</sup>

That brings us back to a previous question: what does Plutarch mean by πρόνοια in the *QC*? And it also adds a new one: how does providence deal with that notion of 'what depends on us'?

#### 4. Providence (πρόνοια)

In the first πρόβλημα of Book VIII, the Platonist Tyndares says that, according to Plato, the father and creator of the universe (718A3: πατέρα καὶ ποιητὴν τοῦ τε κόσμου) is the ungenerated and eternal God<sup>39</sup> (718A4: τὸν ἀγέννητον καὶ αἰδίων θεόν). Tyndares is obviously alluding to the demiurge of the *Timaeus* (28c3-4: ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντός), but he adds two elements, when he says that this God is ungenerated and eternal. In Plato's text, only the Forms are ungenerated (52a1: ἀγέννητον) and eternal (29a3: αἰδίων). As we will see, this conceptual fusion is not innocent.<sup>40</sup>

36 It is worth noting that the verbs of his speech are either participles or forms of the third person.

37 Plutarch himself noticed the Stoic tendency to merge εἰμαρμένη and πρόνοια in *De Stoic. rep.* 1050A-B (= SVF II. 937).

38 On this subject vide Opsomer (2014, pp. 91-93).

39 I chose to write 'God' with a capital 'G' because Plutarch's religious doctrine is substantially monotheistic. Even if he assumes the existence of many divine entities, he recognizes the existence of a supreme God. On this subject vide Hirsch-Luipold (2014, pp. 166-170), who suggests the label 'polylatric monotheism' for Plutarch's views on religion.

40 This vocabular link is also in the *De E* (e.g. 373A5-6, 382F5-383A4). However, this does not entail that Plutarch considered Ideas as "the thoughts of God"; see further discussion in Ferrari (1995, pp. 242-247); Froidefond (1987, pp. 225-227).

On the other hand, even if the qualities of father and creator are expressly applied to the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, we know from other works that Plutarch held a very original interpretation which entails different conclusions. In the *Platonicae quaestiones* he dedicates the second ζήτημα to this issue, arguing that the demiurge is father of men and creator of the universe<sup>41</sup>. This distinction may imply that, after having created the universe, the demiurge kept governing his work. But since, according to the *Timaeus*, the demiurge retires after the creation process and assigns the government of the universe to the cosmic soul, Plutarch's interpretation requires further clarification.

The reference to the demiurge introduces a new πρόβλημα (718C-ff.), the second one of Book VIII, whose title is "In what sense does Plato say that God is always using geometry?". In fact, Plato did not say anything like that in any of the dialogues.<sup>42</sup> Plutarch himself admits it (718C), but he also adds that this statement is tuned in with Plato's convictions. By validating this initial premise, Plutarch directs the discussion towards that previous interpretation of the demiurge as creator of the universe and father of men: not only the God used geometry in the creation process, but he also keeps using it (718C3: ἀεὶ) – while he rules the universe, we might add.

After this brief narratological digression, the discussion begins. First, Tyndares talks about the importance and range of geometry, and then Florus invokes a comparison between mathematics and politics theorized by Plato<sup>43</sup> and materialized by Lycurgus. According to Florus, the Spartan statesman had banished from Lacedaemon the arithmetical proportion (akin to democracy), because it distributes an equal amount according to a number, and introduced the geometric one (akin to oligarchy) for the reason that it considers the worth (metaphorically, the geometric form) besides number (719A-C). Leaving aside the historical implications of this passage, we may just say that arithmetical proportion creates disorder and chaos because it only takes in account the numbers. On the contrary, geometry produces order by distributing different amounts according to fixed criteria.

After this polemical statement, Autobulus is called upon to refute it. He declines the invitation, perhaps because he also believes that geometry generates order from disorder, and provides his own interpretation of the demiurgic creation:

41 This polemical interpretation is rejected by Proclus (*in Tim.* 1.319.15-16). For a thorough analysis of this ζήτημα, see Ferrari (1996, pp. 395-409).

42 This authorial problem is raised by Diogenianus in the first lines of the πρόβλημα.

43 See *Grg.* 508a; *Lg.* 757b-c; *R.* 558c.

ἔφη γὰρ οὕτε τὴν γεωμετρίαν ἄλλου τινὸς ἢ τῶν περὶ τὰ πέρατα συμπτωμάτων καὶ παθῶν εἶναι θεωρητικὴν, οὕτε τὸν θεὸν ἐτέρῳ τινὶ τρόπῳ κοσμοποιεῖν ἢ περατοῦντα τὴν ὕλην ἄπειρον οὐσαν [...]. (719C7-10)

[the narrator speaking] He [Autobulus] said that geometry has no other subject than the properties and characteristics of limits, and that God, when creating the universe, uses no other method than that of imposing limitation on matter, which is unlimited [...].

Throughout his speech, Autobulus will describe the process in detail, insisting in the assignment of the geometric forms to the four basic elements, so that everything may begin from a rational point.<sup>44</sup> But the main idea is that through geometry God imposes limits on a pre-cosmic irrational matter and establishes an order: he creates a κόσμος.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, it is Plutarch himself who concludes the discussion. He recovers his initial thesis of the demiurge as creator and father and frames it in the cosmological context that had just been outlined through the entire πρόβλημα:

ἀεὶ γὰρ ὄν δια τὴν σύμφυτον ἀνάγκην τοῦ σώματος ἐν γενέσει καὶ μετατροπῇ καὶ πάθει παντοδαποῖς ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ δημιουργοῦ βοηθεῖται τῷ λόγῳ πρὸς τὸ παράδειγμα τὴν οὐσίαν ὀρίζοντος· ἢ καὶ κάλλιον τοῦ συμμετροῦ τὸ περὶ μέτρον τῶν ὄντων. (720B10-C4)

Being continuously involved in becoming and shifting and all kinds of events, because of its congenital with its body, the universe is assisted by the Father and Creator, who, by means of reason, and with reference to the model, gives limits to that which exists. Thus, the aspect of measure in things is even more beautiful than their symmetry.

Since the sensible world is in constant change, the demiurge must assure its conformity to the model – the Forms, of course. However, this seems to entail that the creator must be somehow present *in* the world, so that he may maintain it in accordance with the archetype.

Again, the connection with Stoicism is tempting, given the idea of the presence of God in nature. But we know that Plutarch did not accept the Stoic doctrine of immanentism, on the grounds that God must be absolutely transcendent and cannot have neither corporeal nor material essence;<sup>46</sup> that is why the τέλος of human life should be likeness to God (ὁμοίωσις τῷ θεῷ), rather

44 Cf. Pl. *Ti.* 53c-56b.

45 On Plutarch's use of the platonic doctrine of the mathematical rationalization of the cosmos see Ferrari (1995, pp. 117-147).

46 Plutarch refers this conception of God in the *De Iside* 373A, 377E-F, 382F-383A. See further in Hershbell (1992, p. 3348); Karamanolis (2006, p. 109); Babut (1969, pp. 453-465); Cacciatore (2009, p. 290).

than conformity to Nature, like it was to Stoics.<sup>47</sup> But how can it be possible that God is present in the world and, at the same time, to be transcendent?

The answer is outlined in Tyndares' speech. First, he says that through the mathematical sciences we see "traces and ghost-images of the intelligibles' truth" (718E3-4: τῆς τῶν νοητῶν ἀληθείας ἵχνη καὶ εἶδωλα), implying that the Forms are indirectly in the geometrical figures.<sup>48</sup> Besides that, he mentions that geometry must be used by men to contemplate the "eternal and immaterial images in the presence of which God is always God" (718F3-4: τῶν ἀδιδίων καὶ ἀσωμάτων εἰκόνων, πρὸς αἴσπερ ὧν ὁ θεὸς ἀεὶ θεὸς ἐστιν; cf. Pl. *Phdr.* 249c.), suggesting that God is in the Forms, as will be said in the *Platonicae quaestiones*: "God is in the intelligibles" (1002B10: ὁ γὰρ θεὸς ἐν τοῖς νοητοῖς; cf. Ferrari, 2009, p. 91). Thus, if we know that God created the world by contemplating the Forms, we may suppose that He is *in* the world *through* the Forms.

## 5. Possible conclusions

The cosmological insight that Plutarch outlines in the *QC* is perfectly tuned in with his philosophical *curriculum*. As a Platonist, he fully rejects the interference of chance in the world's formation and inner structure, and also denotes a profound distrust in Stoic doctrines of fate and providence for being (in his view) excessively deterministic. The alternative is a teleological model, which, as we have seen, combines elements from both Plato and Aristotle.

We should note, however, that Plutarch's reading is selective. From the *Timaeus*, he argues that the universe is a rationally conceived living-being, which is indirectly administrated by a single divine entity – a form of transcendent providence present in the sensible world through the dependence to an archetypal model. But we know that in Plato's dialogue this permanent operation is maintained by the cosmic soul, not by the demiurge. From Aristotle's natural teleology, he argues that each being has its purpose, because nature does not produce things in vain. This also entails that the whole cosmos has a purpose, which was imprinted by the time of its creation. But we also know that, according to Aristotle, the world was not created.

As usual among Platonists, cosmology is not relegated to a scientific investigation. The explanation of natural processes and their origins have to deal with human agency beyond biology and physics. The ethical counterpart of

47 Vide Dillon (1996, pp. 192-193). For a thorough analysis on Plutarch's ὁμοίωσις τῷ θεῷ, see Becchi (1996).

48 See further details in Ferrari (1995, pp. 156-158; 2009, p. 90).

this cosmological doctrine has to do mostly with responsibility. On this matter, Plutarch also uses elements from both Plato and Aristotle. The interpretation of the Myth of Er shows that, even if fate and chance are always included in human affairs, their interference depends on the choice that souls decided to do before entering the body. The most probable influence of *Ethica Nicomachea* III.2, at least on vocabulary grounds, allowed Plutarch to add the element 'what depends on us' to reinforce the idea that our fate is determined by our choices; not only our day-to-day decisions, but mainly the kind of live that, according to Platonic theology, we choose willingly.

### Acronyms<sup>49</sup>

DK = DIELS, H. & KRANZ, W. (1952).

LM = LAKS, A. & MOST, G. (2016).

SVF = VON ARNIM, H. (1903-1905).

### References

- ARRIGHETTI, G. "Epicuro: Opere". Torino: Einaudi, 1960.
- BABUT, D. "Plutarque et le Stoïcisme". Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Plutarque, Aristote, et l' Aristotélisme". In: VAN DER STOCKT, L. (ed.). *Plutarque Lovaniensia: a Miscellany of Essays on Plutarch*. Louvain: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1996. pp. 1-28.
- BAILEY, C. "Epicurus: the Extant Remains". Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926.
- BECCHI, F. "Plutarco e la Dottrina dell' ὈΜΟΙΩΣΙΣ ΤΩ ΘΕΩΙ tra Platonismo e Aristotelismo". In GALLO, I. *Plutarco e la Religione. Atti del VI Convegno Plutarqueo (Ravello, 29-31 maggio 1995)*. Napoli: M. D'Auria, 1996. pp. 321-335.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Plutarch, Aristotle, and the Peripatetics". In: BECK, M. (ed.). *A Companion to Plutarch*. Malden/Oxford/Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. pp. 73-87.
- BOULOGNE, J. "Plutarque et l'épicurisme". Paris: Doctorat soutenue à Paris 4, 1986.
- BOWIE, E. "Greek Table-talk before Plato". *Rhetorica*, 11, pp. 355-71, 1993.
- BRENK, F. "In Mist Appareled. Religious Themes in Plutarch's *Moralia* and *Lives*". Leiden: Brill, 1977.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'In Learned Conversation'. Plutarch's Symposium Literature and the Elusive Authorial Voice". In: FERREIRA, J. et al. (eds.). *Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2009. pp. 51-62.

49 For Greek authors, I followed the Liddell & Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* abbreviations. For Latin authors, I followed the Clare's *Oxford Latin Dictionary* abbreviations.

- BROADIE, S. "Aristotle and Beyond. Essays on Metaphysics and Ethics". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- CACCIATORE, P. "È il Dio degli Stoici Filantropo?". In: FERREIRA, J. *et al.* (eds.). *Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2009. pp. 289-295.
- DIELS, H. & KRANZ, W. "Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker". 3 Vols. 6<sup>th</sup>. ed. repr. 2005. Zürich: Weidmann, 1952.
- DIHLE, A. "The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity". Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- DILLON, J. "The Middle Platonists. 80 B.C to A.D. 220". Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Plutarch and Platonism". In: BECK, M. (ed.). *A Companion to Plutarch*. Malden/Oxford/Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. pp. 61-72.
- FERRARI, F. "Simposio e Filosofia: il Problema del «Dio Geometra»". In: FERREIRA, J. *et al.* (eds.). *Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2009. pp. 87-96.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Dio: Padre e Artefice. La Teologia di Plutarco in *Plat. Quaest. 2*". In: GALLO, I. *Plutarco e la Religione. Atti del VI Convegno Plutarcheo (Ravello, 29-31 maggio 1995)*. Napoli: M. D'Auria, 1996. pp. 395-409.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Dio, Idee e Materia. La Struttura del Cosmo in Plutarco di Cheronea." Napoli: M. D'Auria, 1995.
- FERREIRA, J. *et al.* (eds.). "Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch". Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2009.
- FREDE, M. "A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought". Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- FROIDEFOND, C. "Plutarque et le Platonisme". *ANRW*, II.36.1, pp. 184-233, 1987.
- HEINZE, R. "Xenocrates". Stuttgart: Teubner, 1892.
- HERSHBELL, J. "Plutarch and Stoicism". *ANRW*, II.36, pp. 3336-3352, 1992.
- HIRSCH-LUIPOLD, R. "Religion and Myth". In: BECK, M. (ed.). *A Companion to Plutarch*. Malden/Oxford/Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. pp. 163-176.
- HOBDEN, F. "The Symposion in Ancient Greek Society and Thought". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- JOHNSON, M. "Aristotle on Teleology". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- JONES, R. "The Platonism of Plutarch". Menasha: George Banta Publishing Company, 1916.
- KARAMANOLIS, G. "Plato and Aristotle in Agreement? Platonists on Aristotle from Antiochus to Porphyry." Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- KECHAGIA, E. "Philosophy in Plutarch's Table Talk. In Jest or in Earnest?". In: KLOTZ, F., OIKONOMOPOULOU, K. (eds.). *The Philosopher's Banquet. Plutarch's Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. pp. 77-104.



- KECHAGIA-OVSEIKO, E. (2011). "Plutarch and Epicureanism". In: BECK, M. (ed.). *A Companion to Plutarch*. Malden/Oxford/Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. pp. 104-120.
- KLOTZ, F. "Portraits of the Philosopher: Plutarch's Self-Presentation in the *Quaestiones convivales*". *CQ*, 57.2, pp. 650-667, 2007.
- KLOTZ, F., OIKONOMOPOULOU, K. (eds.). "The Philosopher's Banquet. Plutarch's Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- LAKS, A., MOST, G. "Early Greek Philosophy". Cambridge Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 9 Vols., 2016.
- LONG, A., SEDLEY, D. "The Hellenistic Philosophers". Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2 Vols., 1987.
- LOPES, R. "The Omnipresence of Philosophy in Plutarch's *Quaestiones Convivales*". In: FERREIRA, J. et al. (eds.). *Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2009. pp. 415-424.
- MARTÍN GARCÍA, F. "Plutarco. Obras Morales y de Costumbres (Moralia) IV (Charlas de Sobremesa)". Madrid: Gredos, 1987.
- MONTIEL, J. "Superstición y ateísmo en la crítica antiepicúrea de Plutarco". In: LEÃO, D., FRAZIER, F. (eds.). *Tychè et Pronoia – La marche du monde selon Plutarque*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2010. pp. 57-68.
- MOSSMAN, J. "Plutarch's *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men* and its place in *symposion* literature". In: MOSSMAN, J. (ed.). *Plutarch and his Intellectual World*. London: Duckworth, 1997. pp. 119-140.
- MURRAY, O. "Symptotica. A Symposium on the Symposium". Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- OIKONOMOPOULOU, K. "Peripatetic Knowledge in Plutarch's *Table Talk*". In: KLOTZ, F., OIKONOMOPOULOU, K. (eds.). *The Philosopher's Banquet. Plutarch's Table Talk in the Intellectual Culture of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. pp. 105-130.
- OPSOMER, J. "Plutarch and the Stoics". In: BECK, M. (ed.). *A Companion to Plutarch*. Malden/Oxford/Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014. pp. 88-103.
- ORFANOS, C., CARRIÈRE, J. "Symposium: banquet et représentations en Grèce et à Rome". Toulouse: Université de Toulouse, 2003.
- ROMERI, L. "Philosophes entre Mots et Mets. Plutarque, Lucien et Athénée autour de la Table de Platon". Grenoble: Jérôme Millón, 2002.
- SEDLEY, D. "Platonic Causes". *Phronesis*, XLIII/2, pp. 114-132, 1998.
- TAYLOR, C. "Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics". *Books II-IV*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- TEODORSSON, S.-T. "A Commentary on Plutarch's Table Talks". Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1989-1996.

TORRACA, L. “I Presupposti della *Tyche* Plutarchea”. In: GALLO, I. (ed.). *Plutarco e la Religione. Atti del VI Convegno Plutarcheo (Ravello, 29-31 maggio 1995)*. Napoli: M. D'Auria, 1996. pp. 105-155.

USENER, H. *Epicurea*. Lipsiae: [s.e.], 1887.

VAN DER STOCKT, L. “Aspects of the Ethics and Poetics of the Dialogue in the *Corpus Plutarcheum*”. In: GALLO, I., MORESCHINI, C. (eds.). *I Generi Letterari in Plutarco. Atti del VIII Convegno Plutarcheo, Pisa, 2-4 giugno 1999*. Napoli: M. D'Auria, 2000. pp. 93-116.

VETTA, M. “Plutarco e il ‘Genere Simposio’”. In: GALLO, I., MORESCHINI, C. (eds.). *I Generi Letterari in Plutarco. Atti del VIII Convegno Plutarcheo, Pisa, 2-4 giugno 1999*. Napoli: M. D'Auria, 2000. pp. 217-229.

VON ARNIM, H. “*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*”. Stutgardia: Bibliotheca Teubneriana, 1903-1905.

XENOPHONTOS, S. “Ethical Education in Plutarch. Moralising Agents and Contexts”. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016.