Chapter 7

Material and Teleological Explanations in Problemata 10

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1 Introduction

It is now generally agreed that Aristotle did not write the Problemata as this work appears in the corpus Aristotelicum. For instance, W.S. Hett (1936, vii) reports that “[t]here can be no doubt that Aristotle is not the author of the Problems as they have come down to us; he is, however, known to have written a book of Problems of which parts have clearly been incorporated in the present work.” On this view, the Problemata is likely a compilation of chapters written by different authors. Some of the chapters might be by Aristotle himself, but most are likely written by Peripatetic philosophers following Aristotle. In short, the idea is that the Problemata is Aristotelian, though not written by Aristotle by himself.

In this chapter I analyze the content of Pr. 10 with the goal of defending a strong version of the prevailing view: not only are the chapters included in Pr. 10 written by Peripatetic philosophers, but by philosophers who are Aristotelian in the robust sense that they accept Aristotle’s natural teleology and the explanations of natural phenomena in some chapters are so close to what we find in Aristotle’s biological works that these chapters could be written by Aristotle himself. The content of Book 10 presents two challenges to

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1 See Forster (1928), Hett (1936), and Mayhew (2011).
2 See Hett (1936, vii) and Mayhew (2011, xvi–xviii).
3 The weaker version of the prevailing view is, to my mind, less interesting though it is consistent with the suggestion that the Problemata started with problems from Aristotle where some of Aristotle’s problems were later removed and other problems were added by other Peripatetic philosophers. For this, see Louis (1991, xxv–xxx). To say only that the authors are Peripatetic in the broad sense of being members of Aristotle’s school tells us very little about the authors’ philosophical views. Theophrastus and Strato, who succeeded Aristotle as heads of the Lyceum, seem to have denied aspects of his natural teleology. According to Plutarch, Strato even denied the involvement of purpose (and, thus, final causes of the sort Aristotle identifies) in nature. On this point, see Sharples (1999).
4 My focus is on the content only. A complete analysis would involve the complementary analysis of the language used in Pr. 10. My view can be contrasted with Louis’ (1991, 149–55). He
this view. First, many of its chapters include ideas and claims that are inconsistent with the ideas and claims we find in Aristotle’s biological works.5 Second, nearly all of the explanations in Pr. 10 are material explanations.6 The second challenge is more significant than the first. If the authors of Pr. 10 accepted Aristotle’s natural teleology, we would expect explanations of natural phenomena that focus on final, rather than material causes: we would expect to find teleological explanations of the kind we find in Aristotle’s work.7 Yet very little in this book makes Aristotelian teleology conspicuous.

Despite these challenges, I argue that the content of Pr. 10 is Aristotelian by establishing that the kind of questions and answers we find in it are consistent with what we find in Aristotle’s own works. Pr. 10 fits into the framework of Aristotle’s natural teleology even if the chapters of this book lack any explicit teleological focus.

2 Pr. 10 as Ἐπιτομὴ φυσικῶν

The title of Pr. 10, Ἐπιτομὴ φυσικῶν, suggests that this book is an epitome—a summary or abridgment—of problems related to nature.8 The problems considered in Book 10 reflect only a small subset of the natural phenomena

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5 These include Historia animalium (all translations by Peck, 1965), De partibus animalium (all translations by Lennox, 2001b), De motu animalium, De incessu animalium (all translations by Farquarson, 1912), De generatione animalium (all translations by Peck, 1943). I follow Gotthelf (see 2012, 311) and Balme (1961) in thinking that the purpose of HA is to catalogue differences in the features of animals that are to be explained “later” (cf. HA 1.6.491a7–11)—i.e. in the other biological works. Certainly, Aristotle does not say much about the causes of differences in animals in his historia.

6 Cadden (2006, 13) reports that the lack of teleology was one reason medieval instructors were attracted to the Problemata: “Other Aristotelian works . . . offered comparable opportunities” to study the science of nature. “But, the Problemata . . . was especially free from the imperatives of teleology.” As such, “the text attracted intellectuals for whom the investigation of proximate efficient and material factors was the primary concern.”

7 Recent insights about Aristotle’s natural teleology successfully highlight the extent to which Aristotle himself focuses on teleological explanations. See, especially, Johnson (2005), Leunissen (2010), and Gotthelf (2012). Gotthelf’s book includes updated versions of his most influential articles in this area.

8 Mayhew (2011, 279) asks “Of what is Pr. 10 an epitome (i.e., a summary or abridgement)?” He notices that Pr. 10 is not plausibly read as a summary or abridgment of the other books of the Problemata. Many of these focus on problems related to living things (Pr. 1–11, 22–23), the parts of humans (Pr. 31–38) and meteorology (Pr. 27–30).