Robert Mayhew (ed.)


The _Problemata Physica_ is a collection of thirty-eight books attributed to Aristotle in the manuscript tradition. Overall, this collection contains almost nine hundred chapters (or ‘problemata’) in the question-answer format, which cover a wide range of scientific and philosophical subjects. The attribution to Aristotle is false, but most of the _problemata_ show a clear consistency with the Peripatetic philosophy, so that they could be reasonably considered as a product of the Peripatetic teaching. There have been different opinions among scholars on the dating of these texts, but nowadays they basically agree that the collection took shape in different stages through a progressive collection of material during the Hellenistic and Roman times, between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century AD.

Robert Mayhew, the editor of this volume, has shown to be very well acquainted with the pseudo-Aristotelian _Problemata_. In 2011, he published the English translation of the work for the Loeb series (Aristotle: Vol. xv and Vol. xvi), which has significantly improved the old Loeb edition by W.S. Hett (1936–1937). In the volume under review, he has collected twenty-one essays of different experts on several _problemata_, thus providing modern scholars with a precious tool for the interpretation of the texts.

In the first chapter, István Bodnár offers an introduction to the work: he summarises the content and the most significant characteristics of this complex collection of problems. In the second chapter, Stephen Menn analyses the question of the relationship between the Aristotelian (and more in general Peripatetic) philosophy and Democritus. In particular, Aristotle appears to be deeply indebted to Democritean aetiology. The later compilation of the _Problemata_ too, with its question-and-answer structure, is to be considered “part of the legacy of Democritus”. James G. Lennox (chapter 3) highlights the influence that the second book of Aristotle’s _Posterior Analytics_ seems to have had on the structure of the _Problemata_. In particular, some chapters of _Posterior Analytics_ 2 introduce the concept of ‘problem’ in the sense of “a proposition about which one is seeking, but does not yet have, a proof” (p. 44).

After the first three chapters, which are concerned with the general structure of all the Peripatetic _Problemata_, the volume collects essays on specific books of the collection. The fourth chapter written by Katerina Oikonomopoulou is devoted to the medical _problemata_, which mostly appear in books 1–11 and 31–38. Given the fact that these medical _problemata_ rely on different sources, the
author analyses the criteria that are at the basis of the selection and organization of this medical material. Oliver Thomas (chapter 5) casts light on the reception and elaboration of Hippocratic material in the pseudo-Aristotelian collection. In fact, he focuses his attention on the relationship between some texts of the Corpus Hippocraticum (such as, for example, De aere aquis et locis, Epidemiae, De victu) and the Problemata. The sixth essay by William W. Fortenbaugh is devoted to the third book of the Problemata, which deals with the issue of wine-drinking and drunkenness. The author analyses some linguistic elements of the book and shows that some of its problems draw on scientific treatises by Theophrastus. The tenth book of the Problemata deals with biology and questions that are mostly related to the study of animals. According to the investigation of Byron J. Stoyles (chapter 7), this book offers explanations of natural phenomena, which are very close to what we find in Aristotle’s treatises. Even though nearly all these explanations of book 10 are material, they nevertheless imply the recognition of the Aristotelian teleology.

Stefan Hagel’s investigation (chapter 8) focuses on very technical issues about ancient music as they are treated in the eleventh book of the Problemata. The sense of smell is the central topic of books 12–13: Han Baltussen (chapter 9) analyses both the parallels and the discrepancies between these two books and the Aristotelian and Theophrastian thought. Mariska Leunissen (chapter 10) analyses book 14, which pertains to the influence that the environment has on the character and bodily features of people. She shows that this kind of “environmental determinism” is mostly consistent with the Aristotelian teaching. The 11th chapter, written by Alan C. Bowen, is the most philological of all the essays collected in the volume. In order to investigate the question of the title of the 15th book of the Problemata, the author analyses some characteristics of the earliest manuscript witness, namely MS Par. gr. 2036, dated back to the 10th century AD. A second essay on a musical topic – after that by S. Hagel – is Andrew Barker’s contribution (chapter 12), which is devoted to the phenomenon of the octave as treated in book 19. Within this framework, Barker also discusses the notion of ἀντίφωνος, which finds in this ps.-Aristotelian book the most occurrences among all the extant Greek literature.

John Wilkins (chapter 13) examines books 21 and 22 of the Problemata, which regard the topic of food: the first one concerns cereal grains, the second fruits. Wilkins compares their contents with some medical texts of the Corpus Hippocraticum, Galen and Plutarch. In the 14th chapter of the volume, Malcolm Wilson investigates the meteorological questions of book 23 of the Problemata. This book is in particular devoted to some very specific questions regarding the sea. The editor of the volume, Robert Mayhew, examines book 26, devoted to another meteorological issue, namely, winds (chapter 15). In particular, May-