

# *Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch*

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# THE OMNIPRESENCE OF PHILOSOPHY IN PLUTARCH'S *QUAESTIONES CONVIVALES*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In the following paper I attempt to clarify in which way philosophy is present in the *Quaestiones Convivales*. I leave aside the role that this work plays as an anthology of Ancient Philosophy and focus on two other aspects that seem to be decisive for an understanding of its architecture: philosophy as a discussion subject, and, more important, as a structural force in this collection of talks. Taking into account the traditional division of Ancient Philosophy in three branches – logic, ethics and physics –, I try to show that there are very clear connections between them and those two vectors of analysis: philosophy as a subject of discussing is strictly related with physics, and philosophy as a structural force depends on ethics and logic.

## 1. Philosophy in the Symposium

As a code of rituals and symbols of interaction, commensality is a practice that follows Man from time immemorial. Initially found in military, religious and political contexts, and later simply practised as a form of social conduct, human interaction around a table was governed by certain rules and procedures that determined the gathering's development<sup>2</sup>. Even in Homer one can find examples of this kind of reunion, which did not have the specific structure that we know from the archaic and classical periods (namely the division between *deipnon* and *symposion*), like the Achaean embassy to Achilles in *Iliad* Book 9 or Odysseus' arrival at the palace of Alcinoüs in *Odyssey* Book 7. In both of them, as in other examples of the same type, the conversation focuses on the intentions of the man who arrives from outside the gathering<sup>3</sup>, and for that reason can be seen to be strictly related to hospitality rituals. After this phase, the sympotic descriptions left by the archaic poets show us an atmosphere of feasting and amusement, in which a primary role was given to the cultivation and dissemination of sung poetry and other forms of music, to ethnographic narratives, and to praise or blame. Briefly, the symposium was a space of amusement, cultural dissemination and remembrance of an heroic past<sup>4</sup>. Still in a context of fun, but already in the classical period, one of the most complete descriptions of a symposium is offered by Aristophanes in his *Wasps*, in which there are many conversations, but all of them in a jesting context (vv. 1175-1206), culminating in mutual insults and several acts of violence by the drunken symposiasts (vv. 1300-1325).

In all of the above-mentioned examples, the importance of λόγος in the symposium is obvious. However, this λόγος has a sense of "conversation"

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<sup>2</sup> Apud O. MURRAY, 1990, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. E. L. BOWIE, 1993, p. 357.

<sup>4</sup> Apud W. RÖSLER, 1990, pp. 231-2 (Cf. E. L. BOWIE, 1993, pp. 358-66).