

***Wonder and the Divine. The Eternal Chain in Plutarch's,
De E apud Delphos 384D-385D****

[*Maravilla y lo divino. La eterna cadena en Plutarco,
De E apud Delphos 384D-385D*]

by

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Abstract

The first two introductory chapters of *De E apud Delphos* are confusing from a chronological point of view. A close reading and detailed analysis, however, reveals that Plutarch hid a chain throughout this part of the text, by means of thematic and verbal connections. This chain highlights that every mystery related to Apollo raises wonder *about* the god that leads to philosophical discussions. These discussions never result in a full answer, but lead to a new mystery related to the god that will elicit new discussions. This not only shows that recent scholarship is correct in claiming that Ammonius' lengthy reply at the end of *De E* is not the eventual solution to the meaning of the E, but also clarifies Sarapion's precise function as Plutarch's dedicatee.

Key-words: Sarapion, Ammonius, Apollo, *De E apud Delphos*, Participatory readership.

Résumé

Chronologiquement, les deux premiers chapitres introductifs du *De E apud Delphos* se prêtent à confusion. Une lecture attentive et une analyse approfondie révèlent cependant que Plutarque a créé une chaîne tout au long de cette partie du texte par des liens thématiques et des similitudes verbales. Cette chaîne souligne que chaque mystère lié à Apollon suscite l'émerveillement devant le dieu conduisant à des discussions philosophiques. Ces discussions n'aboutissent jamais à une réponse complète, mais mènent à un nouveau mystère lié au dieu suscitant de nouvelles discussions. Les études récentes suggèrent donc correctement que la longue réponse d'Ammonius à la fin de *De E* n'est pas la solution finale à la question sur la signification du E. En outre, cela clarifie la fonction précise du dédicataire de l'œuvre, Sarapion.

Mots-clés: Sarapion, Ammonius, Apollon, *De E apud Delphos*, Lecture participative.

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The *E at Delphi* raised many questions in the scholarly debate¹, and so did Plutarch's *De E apud Delphos*. The main problem has been the precise intellectual status of Ammonius' comprehensive speech at the close of the dialogue. At first, his arguments seem to provide the eventual answer to the meaning of the E: he is, after all, the teacher of Plutarch and the other interlocutors, and his exposition follows a series of far less convincing claims, some of which can even hardly be regarded as serious attempts. More recent research, however, has revealed that the final reply has its flaws as well². This contribution builds upon these insights, but will not examine the teacher's answer itself, nor the actual dialogue. The focus will be on the first two introductory chapters

(384D-385D)³, an analysis of which will point out that Ammonius' fallibility fits entirely within the dynamics of this preface and is even announced by it: this part of the work stresses that wonder about any problem (ἀπορία) originating from the divine (such as the E) leads to discussions about the divine that inevitably result in a new ἀπορία. As a consequence, the text not only illustrates that full knowledge about the nature of god cannot and will never be reached, but also that, despite all this, true philosophers will never refrain from searching for the truth and getting as close as possible to it, precisely due to the wonder that all mysteries surrounding the divine cause them.

1. Analysis⁴

The introduction to *De E* consists

¹ See e.g. BABBITT, 1993, pp. 195-197.

² A very convenient overview of this debate is provided by THUM, 2013, pp. 1-20, who argues against the former *communis opinio* in the remainder of his book. OBSIEGER, 2013 argues that Ammonius' reply is not to be regarded as the final answer as well, but also claims that this reply and those of all other interlocutors are not even to be taken seriously (esp. 19-46). In a review, ROSKAM, 2015, p. 319 argues against this: "In my view, Obsieger is right in arguing that nobody, not even Ammonius, is meant to speak the last word about this topic, but he overstates his case by overemphasising the role of humour. In fact, Obsieger underestimates, in my view, the multifaceted dynamics of Plutarch's philosophical ζήτησις." See also BONAZZI, 2008 on ζήτησις as a core theme in *De E*. BRENK, 2016 points out that it is a typical feature of Plutarch's dialogues to represent flawed characters.

³ OBSIEGER, 2013, p. 16 divides the text into three parts. The first part consists of these two introductory chapters.

⁴ Greek texts and translations are taken from BABBITT, 1993 (translation of *De E*); BURNET, 1957 (Greek text of Plato's *Protagoras*); LAMB, 1999 (translation of Plato's *Protagoras*); and OBSIEGER, 2013 (Greek text of *De E*).

of four parts that all concern a specific conversation. All of these are related to a different moment in time, but are connected by the same location, the oracle of Delphi:

	Interlocutors	Indicators of place	Indicators of time	
384D-F	Plutarch and Sarapion	The Chaeronean, priest of Delphi, sends Πυθικοὶ λόγοι to Sarapion in Athens	πρῶτον; the present; and the future: a response is expected from Sarapion	D
384F-385A	The Seven Sages	[Takes place in Delphi, cf. infra on Plato, <i>Protagoras</i> , 343ab]	ἐν ἀρχῇ	A
385A-B	Plutarch, his sons, and some strangers	The strangers are in Delphi, as they plan to leave ἐκ Δελφῶν soon; παρὰ τὸν νεών	ἐναγχος	C
385B-D	Ammonius and his students (one of which is Plutarch)	Description of many Delphic objects and customs; ὅρα δὲ καὶ ταυτὶ τὰ προγράμματα (the Delphic maxims, displayed on the temple)	πάλαι ποτὲ καθ'ὸν καιρὸν ἐπεδήμει Νέρων ⁵	B

It immediately stands out that the order in which the events are described in the text (first column) does not agree with the actual chronological sequence (final column: D-A-C-B) at all. This article will discuss the text in line with this second arrangement, as this will reveal further insights into two interesting aspects of the work: (a) the status of Ammonius' speech, and (b) the precise function of Sarapion as the dedicatee. Yet one should of course keep

in mind that this approach differs from a usual linear reading, and that every part in the table above is connected with the previous one and builds upon it⁶.

Finally, it should be noted that the following interpretation is at several points inspired by the outstanding commentary of Thum. I do, however, not believe that the first two chapters of *De E* necessarily serve as an introduction to *De E*, *De Pyth. or.*, and *De def. or.*⁷, but I will read them as the starting point

⁵ In 66-67 AD, see THUM, 2013, p. 3; OBSIEGER, 2013, p. 18.

⁶ As will be highlighted in the following analysis when necessary.

⁷ Πυθικοὶ λόγοι is usually interpreted as referring to these three texts, see also MÜLLER, 2013, p. 65 on this matter, with references to secondary literature. BABUT, 1992 also claims that *De Pyth. or.* and *De def. or.* belong to a series of dialogues sent to Sarapion together with *De E*. OBSIEGER, 2013, p. 98, on the contrary, argues that the precise meaning of Πυθικοὶ λόγοι is unclear: "Damit kann entweder gemeint sein, daß mehrere Dialoge an Sarapion gesendet worden sind, oder daß Plutarch einen einzigen Dialog abgeschickt hat" (after which he gives a convenient overview of the scholarly debate on this matter). He

of *De E* alone. As a consequence, these introductory chapters in my view have a more direct connection with this dialogue itself: Thum correctly indicates that the dedication to Sarapion announces themes addressed by the discussion between Ammonius and his students⁸, but I will take a further step and regard this dedication – and the relationship between Plutarch and the Athenian it evokes – more specifically as an actual *continuation* of this discussion, desired by the author.

A The starting point? The Seven Wise Men and the E (384F-385A)

In this part (A), which follows the dedication to Sarapion (D), Plutarch introduces the topic of *De E* itself. He does so in two sentences. (a) The first one describes Apollo's functions. As the god of the oracle, he of course has to release the visitors of the problems (ἀπορίαι) concerning their lives. The problems of reason, however, he himself submits to philosophers. This appears especially from the dedication (384F: καθιέρωσις) of the E at Delphi, Plutarch continues.

(b) What the author exactly means with all this, only becomes apparent from the next sentence (384F-385A):

τοῦτο γὰρ εἰκὸς οὐ κατὰ τύχην οὐδ' οἶον ἀπὸ κλήρου τῶν γραμμάτων μόνον ἐν προεδρίᾳ **παρὰ τῷ θεῷ** γενέσθαι καὶ λαβεῖν **ἀναθήματος** τάξιν **ιεροῦ** καὶ θεάματος, ἀλλ' ἡ δύναμιν αὐτοῦ κατιδόντας ἰδίαν καὶ περιττὴν ἢ συμβόλῳ χρωμένους πρὸς ἕτερόν τι τῶν ἀξίων σπουδῆς τοὺς ἐν ἀρχῇ περὶ τὸν θεὸν φιλοσοφῆσαντας οὕτω προσέσθαι.

For the likelihood is that it was not by chance nor, as it were, by lot that this was the only letter that came to occupy first place with the god and attained the rank of a sacred offering and something worth seeing; but it is likely that those who, in the beginning, sought after knowledge of the god either discovered some peculiar and unusual potency in it or else used it as a token with reference to some other of the matters of the highest concern, and thus adopted it.

argues that it is most likely that Plutarch sent only one work, *De E*, to Sarapion. I follow his arguments in this respect. In addition, the use of ἀπαρχαί in the letter is, in my view, too closely connected with the theme of *De E* to assume that the letter to Sarapion would introduce more than this text alone.

⁸ See especially THUM, 2013, p. 80: “Die beiden wesentlichen Aussagen der Widmung an Sarapion, einerseits die Idealisierung philosophisch-literarischer Tätigkeit, andererseits der Wunsch nach stetiger Weiterentwicklung und Verbesserung der Textproduktion im Austausch zwischen Plutarch und Sarapions Athener Freundeskreis, erscheinen spiegelbildlich in der Charakteristik des Themas von *De E apud Delphos* als Zurückführung philosophischer Inspiration auf Apollon selbst, bei gleichzeitiger Hervorhebung der prinzipiellen Unabschließbarkeit der philosophischen Prozesse, die sich an dem delphischen E als einer Weihgabe entzünden, die den inspiratorischen wie den unabschließbaren Aspekt der apollinischen Philosophieprotreptik in sich vereint.”

Three observations in (b), indicated in bold, clarify (a):

[1] The ἀπορία which Apollo enjoys to propose to philosophers (cf. a), are related to his own being, as the “philosophizing men of old” reflected on his nature (cf. b)⁹. In other words, every mysterious sign that comes *from* the god instigates questions *about* the god. This will be emphasized more explicitly later in the text (B).

[2] The ancient philosophers in question are to be identified as the Seven Wise Men: Plutarch alludes to the tradition that they dedicated the E at Delphi to the god¹⁰. Especially relevant is Plato, *Protagoras*, 343ab¹¹. This passage deserves full quotation, as it is repeatedly alluded to in the introduction to *De E*¹²:

οὔτοι πάντες ζηλωταὶ καὶ ἐρασταὶ καὶ μαθηταὶ ἦσαν τῆς Λακεδαιμονίων παιδείας, καὶ καταμάθοι ἂν τις αὐτῶν τὴν σοφίαν τοιαύτην οὖσαν, ῥήματα βραχέα ἀξιολογούμενευτα ἑκάστῳ εἰρημένα· οὔτοι καὶ κοινῇ συνελθόντες **ἀπαρχὴν** τῆς σοφίας **ἀνέθεσαν τῷ Ἀπόλλωνι** εἰς τὸν νεὸν τὸν ἐν Δελφοῖς, γράψαντες

ταῦτα ἃ δὴ πάντες ὕμνοῦσιν, Γινῶθι σαυτὸν καὶ Μηδὲν ἄγαν.

All these were enthusiasts, lovers and disciples of the Spartan culture; and you can recognize that character in their wisdom by the short, memorable sayings that fell from each of them: they assembled together and dedicated these as the first-fruits of their lore to Apollo in his Delphic temple, inscribing there those maxims which are on every tongue – “Know thyself” and “Nothing overmuch.”

Plutarch obviously has this fragment in mind. The E at Delphi, then, did not immediately come from the god himself, although this is what a first reading of (a) alone suggests, but it was the result and “final” answer of a discussion which the Seven had *about* the god (b). If one reads this in connection with observation [1], one can only conclude that, as Thum writes, the sages first observed a sign or ἀπορία – it is impossible to determine what exactly – that came from Apollo himself. This made them wonder what it might tell about his nature, and the result of their conversation was “E”¹³, whatever this might mean

⁹ The construction περὶ τὸν θεόν raised questions in the scholarly debate, see OBSIEGER, 2013, pp. 103-104. The meaning, however, is clear: the Seven were philosophizing about the divine.

¹⁰ OBSIEGER, 2013, p. 94.

¹¹ See also THUM, 2013, p. 53; and OBSIEGER, 2013, p. 99 on this parallel.

¹² See also B and D, discussed *infra*.

¹³ THUM, 2013, p. 52: “Da sich in der Weihung des E somit einerseits das Wesen des Gottes als eines Rätselstellers, andererseits das Resultat menschlicher philosophischer

(Plutarch here already subtly announces that he, up to the moment he wrote the dialogue, has not found a satisfactory answer to the meaning of the letter: this is further developed in C).

[3] Yet in the end, the E is still related to the nature of the god, not only because it resulted from a discussion about his true being instigated by the god himself, but also because it was “dedicated to him”, as appears from both the wording in 384F-385A and from *Protagoras*, 343ab as the background passage. In this way, the E became part of the Apollonic lore, and, as Thum writes, it hereby also became a new mysterious sign (an ἀπορία) that can and will be food for another series of discussions

on the divine nature¹⁴. This is important for a correct understanding of B.

B Ammonius and his students (385B-D)

As Thum notices, there is a close connection between A and B¹⁵: content and wording highlight a parallel structure¹⁶. This suggests that the discussion of the Seven Wise Men should somehow be put at the same level as the dialogue between Ammonius and his students. Thum lists the following elements¹⁷:

[1] In a first stage, Plutarch claims that Ammonius correctly stated that Apollo is both a philosopher and a diviner. This retakes his own claim at the outset of A on the god’s two main functions.

Betätigung ausdrücken soll, ist das Zeichen ambivalent, denn es stellt zugleich ein zu Lösungsversuchen animierendes Rätsel und eine rätselhafte Reaktion der Urphilosophen auf eine von Plutarch nicht weiter explizierte Anregung des Gottes dar.” See also OBSIEGER, 2013, pp. 101-102.

¹⁴ THUM, 2013, pp. 79-80: “Denn dort wird das delphische E als Weihung apollinischer Urphilosophen charakterisiert, die das Wesen des Gottes als Inspirator zu philosophischem Denken repräsentieren soll, freilich mit dem entscheidenden Aspekt, dass dieses E selbst wiederum ein Rätsel darstellen soll, das seinerseits philosophisches Denken in einer Weise herausfordert, die die Unerschöpflichkeit der inspiratorischen Kraft des Gottes durch seine letztliche Unlösbarkeit rückwirkend bestätigt.”

¹⁵ THUM, 2013, pp. 3 and 83.

¹⁶ But B is of course introduced by C (Plutarch’s encounter with the strangers), at the end of which Plutarch writes that he was reminded of an earlier discussion with Ammonius (B), see *infra*.

¹⁷ THUM, 2013, p. 83: “Ammonios beginnt mit einer Erklärung des philosophischen Zuges im Wesen des Gottes, der von seiner traditionellen Funktion als Orakelgott geschieden wird, entwickelt darauf den speziellen Charakter der apollinischen Philosophie als eines Suchprozesses, der durch das Sich-Verwundern und Nicht-Weiter-Wissen (*De E* 2, 385C θαυμάζειν καὶ ἀπορεῖν) angestoßen wird, kennzeichnet den heiligen Bezirk des Apollon als philosophische Trainingsstätte, die mit Gegenständen und Bräuchen angefüllt ist, die zum Nachdenken anregen, und hebt schließlich das E als das Rätsel *par excellence* sogar gegenüber den berühmten Sprüchen μηδὲν ἄγαν und γνῶθι σαυτόν angesichts seiner philosophischen Unerschöpflichkeit hervor.”

[2] Similar to the earlier section, B focuses on Apollo as an instigator of philosophy. After listing the god's names stressing this aspect of his character, Plutarch cites Ammonius in direct speech. His argument is very similar to the god's practice as a "philosopher" described in A: since he wants to promote philosophy, it should not surprise that everything surrounding him is clouded in mystery (385C: τὰ πολλὰ τῶν περὶ τὸν θεὸν ἔοικεν αἰνίγμασι κατακεκρύφθαι, cf. also 385B: ἀπορία, and 385C: ἀπορεῖν). This generates wonder (385C: θαυμάζειν), which makes people speculate (185C: ζητεῖν and φιλοσοφεῖν) on the god's nature. This also appears from the next list of such curious elements that raise questions: all of these are related to the oracle of Delphi itself, and therefore belong to the divine.

[3] The final elements which Ammonius lists are the famous Delphic maxims γνῶθι σαυτὸν and μηδὲν ἄγαν (385D). This is again a reference to the Platonic subtext on the Seven Wise Men, where the same maxims are cited: they not only provided the Delphic temple with the E (cf. A), but also with these sayings¹⁸. Plutarch's teacher continues (385D):

ὅσας ζητήσεις κεκίνηκε φολοσόφους καὶ ὅσον λόγων πλῆθος ἅφ' ἐκάστου καθάπερ ἀπὸ σπέρματος ἀναπέφυκεν· ὧν οὐδενὸς ἦττον οἶμαι γόνιμον λόγων εἶναι τὸ νῦν ζητούμενον.

how many philosophic inquiries have they set on foot, and what a

horde of discourses has sprung up from each, as from a seed! And no less productive of discourse than any one of them, as I think, is the present subject of inquiry."

After this, the actual discussion starts. The double use of λόγοι is interesting in this regard. The first occurrence refers to the abundance of discussions and different points of view uttered throughout history about the two maxims just quoted. The second seems to refer to the next dialogue, where various positions will be defended by different interlocutors. Yet in line with the first λόγων, it also suggests that their conversation will not be the last one – and that Ammonius was aware of that – as the passage emphasizes the endlessness of philosophical debates on such complex matters.

This interpretation goes hand in hand with the parallel structure of A and B, which implies that history repeats itself. The Seven Wise Men encountered an ἀπορία of Apollo. This made them marvel and philosophize about the divine nature. The E, the result of their discussion, then became a new ἀπορία, again belonging to the god. This, in turn, amazed Ammonius and his students. The result will be a new discussion, and one expects that their answer to the precise meaning of this intriguing letter will lead to a new ἀπορία concerning the god. All this is in line with claims in C and D.

¹⁸ See *supra*.

C Plutarch, his sons, and some strangers (385AB)

This section follows the reference to the Seven Wise Men in A. As stated, Plutarch already suggested there that the E is still a mystery to him (A [2]). This is further elaborated in C: during his philosophical education, the Chaeronean already tried to avoid the subject, probably because of its complexity, but when he recently met some strangers in Delphi who wanted to learn the true meaning of the E, he felt forced to tell something about it. He continues (385AB):

ὥς δὲ καθίσας παρὰ τὸν νεῶν τὰ μὲν αὐτὸς ἠρξάμην ζητεῖν τὰ δ' ἐκείνους ἐρωτᾶν, ὑπὸ τοῦ τόπου καὶ τῶν λόγων αὐτῶν <ἀνεμνήσθην> ἃ πάλαι ποτὲ καθ' ὃν καιρὸν ἐπεδήμει Νέρων ἠκούσαμεν Ἀμμωνίου καὶ τινῶν ἄλλων διεξιόντων ἐνταῦθα τῆς αὐτῆς ἀπορίας ὁμοίως ἐμπεσούσης.

I found them seats, therefore, near the temple, and I began to seek some answer myself and to put questions to them; influenced as I was by the place and the conversation itself, I remembered what, when Nero was here some years ago, I had heard Ammonius and others discussing, when the same question obtruded itself in a similar way.

These final words introduce B¹⁹. Three observations are important in this regard. First, as scholars noticed, it again becomes apparent that Ammonius' answer at the close might not fully grasp the total meaning of the Delphic E in the eyes of Plutarch²⁰: he could just have mentioned his teacher's answer to the strangers, but instead he refers to the *entire* dialogue. Second, it is clear that he did not provide these visitors with a simple (and probably incorrect) response in order to avoid the complex issue once more: he entered into dialogue with them. Third, but in line with the first two observations, Plutarch again uses the term λόγοι, which will be recalled by the readers once they reach the end of B. As a consequence, the text again emphasizes that the dialogue between Ammonius and his students is not the endpoint of philosophical discussions about the E, as later λόγοι such as the conversation between Plutarch and the strangers still concern the same topic. This has strong implications for D.

D Plutarch and Sarapion (384D-F)

D.1 Euripides' verses

Στχιδίους τιςιν οὐ φαύλως ἔχουσιν, ὦ φίλε Σαραπίων, ἐνέτυχον
πρώην, ἃ Δικαίαρχος (fr. 77 Wehrli)
Εὐριπίδην οἶεται πρὸς Ἀρχέλαον

¹⁹ One should however keep in mind that, as OBSIEGER, 2013, p. 17 points out, C is not to be seen “als ein in das Proömium eingebettetes Rahmengespräch”, as the conversation between Ammonius and his students is also addressed to Sarapion as Plutarch's dedicatee.

²⁰ BABUT, 1992, p. 201; BONAZZI, 2008, p. 207; OBSIEGER, 2013, pp. 19 and 105; see also *infra* on THUM, 2013.

εἰπεῖν (fr. 969 Kannicht):

‘οὐ βούλομαι πλουτοῦντι δωρεῖσθαι πένης,
μή μ’ ἄφρονα κρίνης ἢ διδοῦς αἰτεῖν δοκῶ.’

Not long ago, my dear Sarapion,
I came upon some lines, not badly
done, which Dicaearchus thinks
Euripides addressed to Archelaüs:

I will not give poor gifts to one so rich,
Lest you should take me for a fool, or I
Should seem by giving to invite a gift.

Plutarch commences his introductory letter with a quote (384D), as he often does²¹. As usual, this has a particular relevance to the work that follows, and in this case also to the relationship between Plutarch and Sarapion:

[1] Very subtly, it alludes to the topic of *De E* and to the function of the entire work. The addition of the phrase οὐ φαύλως ἔχουσιν is of paramount importance in this respect: it refers to Plutarch's aesthetic appreciation of these verses. It becomes apparent that his amazement at something so well formulated made him reflect on its content (384DE):

χαρίζεται μὲν γὰρ οὐδὲν ὁ δι-
δοῦς ἀπ’ ὀλίγων μικρὰ τοῖς πολλὰ
κεκτημένοις, ἀπιστούμενος δ’ ἄν-
τι μηδενὸς διδόναι κακοηθείας
καὶ ἀνελευθερίας προσλαμβάνει
δόξαν. ὅρα δ’ ὅσον ἐλευθεριότητι

καὶ κάλλει τὰ χρηματικὰ δῶρα
λείπεται τῶν ἀπὸ λόγου καὶ σο-
φίας, <ᾗ> καὶ διδόναι καλὸν ἐστι
καὶ διδόντας ἀνταιτεῖν ὅμοια πα-
ρὰ τῶν λαμβανόντων.

For he does no favour who gi-
ves small gifts from scanty means
to wealthy men; and since it is not
credible that his giving is for noth-
ing, he acquires in addition a re-
putation for disingenuousness and
servility. Observe also how, as far as
independence and honour are con-
cerned, material gifts fall far below
those bestowed by literary discou-
se and wisdom; and these gifts it is
both honourable to give and, at the
same time, to ask a return of like
gifts from the recipients.

In a first stage, Plutarch only argues that there is obviously some truth in Euripides' quote. In the second sentence, however, the author applies it to a different situation. It becomes clear that the poet's claim does not contain a general truth, but should be adjusted. The Chaeronean, then, enters into dialogue with the Athenian poet of old, so to speak, and thereby reaches a better understanding of the saying. This reminds one of the dialogue of *De E* itself, in which every interlocutor's contribution might add something new to the understanding of the letter²².

²¹ See DUFF, 2014, p. 334 on *chreiai* and references to literature that often occur at the outset of Plutarch's prologues.

²² MÜLLER, 2012 argues that *De E* shows how the method of dialogue brings one closer to the truth. BABUT, 1992, p. 194 speaks of “un *ordre ascendant*”. BONAZZI, 2008 also argues that, although Ammonius' speech is not entirely true, it is still the most important contribution of all interlocutors. See also ROSKAM, 2021, p. 23 and *passim*. It is interesting

[2] In addition, there is the connection between Euripides and Sarapion. The latter was not only known as a Stoic philosopher, but he also wrote poetry and combined both his philosophical and his poetic talent: as Bowersock writes, he “clearly participated in the revival of the old and honorable tradition of versified philosophy, practised formerly by the greatest authorities on τὰ φυσικά, Parmenides and Empedocles”²³, and he did all this in Athens²⁴. This strongly links Plutarch’s correspondent with the Athenian tragedian²⁵.

Both elements will appear to be relevant in what follows.

D.2 Plutarch and Sarapion: the chain extended

In this part of the letter, all that precedes is made relevant for the concrete

situation of author and dedicatee. *De E* now turns out to be a specific example of such an intellectual gift referred to in the adjustment to Euripides’ quote (D.1 [1]). Thus, there is no problem in asking for a present in return (384E):

ἐγὼ γοῦν πρὸς σὲ καὶ διὰ σοῦ τοῖς αὐτόθι φίλοις τῶν Πυθικῶν λόγων ἐνίους ὥσπερ ἀπαρχὰς ἀποστέλλων ὁμολογῶ προσδοκᾶν ἑτέρους καὶ πλείονας καὶ βελτίονας παρ’ ὑμῶν, ἅτε δὴ καὶ πόλει χρωμένων μεγάλῃ καὶ σχολῇς μᾶλλον ἐν βιβλίοις πολλοῖς καὶ παντοδαπαῖς διατριβαῖς εὐποροῦντων.

I, at any rate, as I send to you, and by means of you for our friends there, some of our Pythian discourses, an offering of our first-fruits, as it were, confess that I am

to note that such “*ordre ascendant*” often dominates *Quaest. conv.* too, a work which is rhetorically highly elaborated and seems to be influenced by the *progymnasmata*, as pointed out by FERNÁNDEZ DELGADO & PORDOMINGO, 2017. In addition, various aspects of Plutarch’s presentation of his own persona in *Quaest. conv.*, as discussed by KLOTZ, 2007, remind one of the various stages of the author’s life throughout *De E* (and the same goes for the fact that “the last lines of the *Quaest. conv.* leave open the possibility of further conversations”, see KLOTZ, 2007, p. 666; this aspect in *De E* will be further explored *infra*). A thorough comparison of *Quaest. conv.* and *De E*, then, might perhaps reveal interesting insights concerning a possible shared philosophical and rhetorical background of both works.

²³ BOWERSOCK, 1982, pp. 278-279.

²⁴ On Sarapion, see also BABUT, 1993, pp. 206-207; OBSIEGER, 2013, p. 95.

²⁵ THUM, 2013, pp. 44-45 rather focuses on a flattering application of the Euripides-quote: Sarapion was very wealthy, because of which one might see a connection between the poet and Archelaus. Furthermore, the use of ἀπαρχή (discussed *infra*) might be seen as witty comparison of the Athenian and Apollo. Thum concludes (p. 45): “All die anspielungsreichen und witzig-ironisch getönten Artigkeiten, die Plutarch somit in seiner Widmungsadresse an Sarapion richtet, dienen zweifellos nicht allein einer freundschaftlichen *captatio benevolentiae* Sarapions als des intendierten ersten Lesers der ‘Pythischen Dialoge’ und speziell von *De E apud Delphos*, sondern zeichnen zugleich ein Idealbild eines intellektuell-schriftstellerischen Lebensstils, in das sich Plutarch selbst genauso einzeichnet, wie er in ihm Sarapion und den Athener Freunden einen mindestens gleichrangigen Platz zuweist.”

expecting other discourses, both more numerous and of better quality, from you and your friends, inasmuch as you have not only all the advantages of a great city, but you have also more abundant leisure amid many books and all manner of discussions.

The wording and content in bold remind one of other Plutarchan texts. All three lead to the same conclusion of B and C: Ammonius' extensive speech is not the ultimate truth, but it still must tell something *about* the god and will in this way become a new ἀπορία about the divine nature, in the sense that there remains much food for further discussion²⁶.

[1] First, there is the ambiguous reference to the literary work²⁷. In the previous sentence (384DE), λόγος seemed to refer to reason and perhaps to an actual conversation, but the author now uses the plural to refer to *De E*, also containing a conversation, albeit in written form²⁸. Yet at the same time, he also expects his text to become part of an actual dialogue, since he asks for a work in return. As such, the word

has a metatextual function that should encourage the reader to participate in an active reading process and to assume a critical attitude to the content of the text, for if the work should become part of an ongoing dialogue and discussion, this suggests that one should not expect ready-made and definitive solutions to philosophical issues. The connection Sarapion-Euripides (D.1 [2]) also gains additional significance here: Plutarch asks his addressee to enter into dialogue with his literary creation, in the same way as he responded to Euripides' marvelous verses²⁹. This also alludes to the possibility of Plutarch sending a new reply to Sarapion's future text.

[2] Another recurrent expression in Plutarch is the comparison of the literary work with ἀπαρχαί³⁰. This is perhaps also the most striking similarity with Plato's *Protagoras* 343ab quoted above, where the E itself is described as an ἀπαρχή offered by the Seven Wise Men³¹. The implication of this verbal agreement is pregnant with meaning. As it refers to the Πυθικοὶ λόγοι in the context of the introductory letter, it

²⁶ Cf. LSJ s.v. ἀπορία: "IV. in Dialectic, *question for discussion, difficulty, puzzle*."

²⁷ This reminds one of the ambiguity of the word "βίος", exploited by Plutarch; see DUFF, 1999, 33.

²⁸ See also *supra*: I am inclined to read these chapters as an introduction to *De E* specifically.

²⁹ I therefore agree with THUM, 2013, pp. 36-42 on Sarapion as addressee of the text: he argues against Babut, 1993 that the Athenian is not to be reduced (p. 42) "zu einem theologisch-philosophisch fehlgeleiteten und platonisch-orthodox umzuerziehenden Stoiker".

³⁰ It also occurs at the outset of *Reg. et imp. apophth.*, see FLACELIÈRE, 1976, p. 102; BECK, 2002, pp. 166-167 (also referring to a similar usage in *Adv. Col.* 1117DE).

³¹ See *supra*. See also BONAZZI, 2008, pp. 208-209; THUM, 2013, p. 53.

equates the E at Delphi with the dialogue *about* the E itself. This simile, then, again has a metatextual function: in the same way as the Delphic E was the result of a philosophical conversation (the Seven), but became an ἀπορία for later interlocutors (Ammonius, the students, the strangers, and many others) and thereby also part of the divine lore, Plutarch's *De E* will to a certain extent also end in ἀπορία (given that Ammonius' speech does not contain the definitive answer and will thus raise some questions) and as such provide a new matter of debate (Plutarch and Sarapion) about the god. The text, then, also belongs to the divine (cf. the dedication metaphor),

as it concerns a mystery that must tell something about Apollo.

In other words, the dedication metaphor makes the dialogue (both the text and the actual "historical" dialogue) part of a chain of discussions on the divine nature that started with the Seven and probably earlier. Every single part of this chain starts with an ἀπορία originating from Apollo that instigates θαῦμα. This amazement leads to philosophical discussions (λόγοι and φιλοσοφῶν) about the god's nature. The result of this is never a full answer, but becomes a new ἀπορία that is related to the divine (cf. 384E: ἀπαρχάς, 384F: καθιερώσει, and 385A: ἀναθήματος), and will therefore once more arouse θαῦμα³²:

	ἀπορία	Discussion	"Answer"
[1] The Seven	Unknown	φιλοσοφήσαντας (385A)	<u>The E at Delphi</u>
[2] Ammonius et al.	<u>The E at Delphi</u>	λόγων (385D)	<i>Responses of Ammonius and his interlocutors</i>
[3] Plutarch and Sarapion	<i>Responses of Ammonius and his interlocutors</i>	Plutarch expects λόγοι from Sarapion in return

The suggestion of this chain is that the ἀπορία of the Seven is not the starting point, nor will the desired dialogue between Plutarch and Sarapion be the endpoint. The implication is that one can never attain full insight into Apollo's true being³³. One might

therefore ask why one should even try to philosophize about the divine. The next point will address this issue.

[3] Also typical of Plutarch is the reference to his humble living place, the small village of Chaeronea, adduced as

³² As appears from the table below, C as such is no part of the chain. Yet it is a necessary part, as it highlights that there is indeed a chain: it is primarily meant to show that Ammonius' answer (B) does not suffice in Plutarch's eyes, thereby inviting the reader to assume a critical attitude. See also THUM, 2013, p. 62 in this regard: "Nimmt man den Autor beim Wort, so hat ihn jene Diskussion aus seiner Jugendzeit keineswegs dadurch beeindruckt, dass in ihr das Rätsel des E gelöst worden sei".

³³ See also BONAZZI, 2008 on this fallibility of human nature as an important theme in *De E*.

a topos of modesty. As in *Dem.* 1-2, this is contrasted with a city where books and information are abundant³⁴. In this way, the author is subtly apologizing for possible imperfections in his work, as one expects in such a preface. Yet precisely in this regard, there is a striking contrast with Plutarch's adjustment to Euripides' quote (D.1 [1]): a first reading of this passage suggests that the author will ask for *similar* gifts (384E: ὅμοια) from his friend, in line with the lack of an intellectual gap between the Chaeronean and his dedicatee and contrasting with the social distance between the rich and poor. Yet the author now explicitly asks for a *better* present in return. This, however, is only an apparent inconsistency. Sarapion's answer will probably be better, not only because of his living place, but also because this is how a dialogue works³⁵: his reply builds upon previous insights shared by Plutarch, his interlocutor. Thus, as Müller writes, the fact that Plutarch expects better from his dedicatee announces an important theme throughout the text: "discussion

as the method of finding the truth"³⁶, although one should add to this that the plain truth will never be reached³⁷.

2. Conclusion

A chronological reading of the four parts of *De E* 384D-385D reveals a focus on the endless search for truth about the divine nature, always encouraged by wonder. Every debate about the god instigated by an ἀπορία is doomed to raise new questions (and in this sense to end up in another ἀπορία), but still reflects a certain insight about the god. This new insight will amaze new philosophers, who will have a discussion about it and will hereby further extend the chain. Every new discussion might provide a more complete knowledge about the divine, but an endpoint will never be reached. Yet this should not discourage those who love and pursue wisdom, as every inch of progress is worth the effort for true philosophers.

The introduction, then, strongly announces that Ammonius' answer will not express the full truth about the mysterious

³⁴ ZADOROJNYI, 2005, pp. 499-500 focuses on the differences between the proems to *De E* and *Dem.*

³⁵ MÜLLER, 2012.

³⁶ MÜLLER, 2012, p. 245, where he stresses multiple times that Ammonius provides the eventual answer. MÜLLER, 2013 discusses how *De Pyth. or.* and *De def. or.* also reflect on how a dialogue functions and how its interlocutors should behave

³⁷ As THUM, 2013, p. 50 points out, ὁρεξιν ἐμποιῶν ἀγωγὸν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν (384F) does not mean that truth will also be reached ("Ob dieses Ziel erreicht werden kann, lässt Plutarch völlig offen, und dies mit Bedacht").

E. It invites not only the dedicatee, but also the readers to throw a critical look at the teacher's lengthy speech. Their main question will be what the text, and especially its closing part that seems to contain the most reliable answer, truly tells about the god – for it must at least tell *some truth* about him, although one can only wonder what that might be.

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