

PLUTARCH ON THE ALPHA

Résumé. — Cet article propose une interprétation d'un passage de Plutarque, *Quaestiones convivales* 9, 2 (737D - 738C), qui soulève la fascinante question de savoir pourquoi la lettre alpha vient en premier dans l'alphabet. Plutarque y mentionne quatre explications différentes, qu'il analyse tour à tour : (1) Protogène donne la réponse traditionnelle élaborée dans les écoles des grammairiens (basée sur la distinction entre voyelles, semi-voyelles et consonnes) ; (2) Ammonius rappelle l'origine phénicienne de l'alphabet et introduit ainsi une perspective historique ; (3) « Plutarque » soutient que le son 'alpha' est le premier que l'on prononce naturellement et (4) Zopyrion évacue la question comme résultant d'une simple coïncidence. La *Quaestio* dans son ensemble illustre ainsi la dynamique de la pensée zététique de Plutarque, qui parvient à rendre justice aux différents aspects d'un problème donné.

Abstract. — This article provides an interpretation of Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales* 9, 2 (737D-738C), which raises the intriguing question of why the letter alpha is placed first in the alphabet. Plutarch there mentions the following four alternative explanations, which are analysed one by one: (1) Protogenes proposes the traditional answer elaborated in the schools of the grammarians (based on the distinction between vowels, semivowels and consonants); (2) Ammonius recalls the Phoenician origin of the alphabet and thus introduces a historical perspective; (3) "Plutarch", as a staged participant to the discussion, argues that the alpha is the first sound to be naturally uttered; and (4) Zopyrio dismisses the whole issue as a matter of pure coincidence. The whole *Quaestio* thus illustrates the dynamics of Plutarch's zetetic thinking that succeeds in doing justice to the different aspects of a given problem.

This article deals with an ancient banquet of successful teachers – a particularly fitting and appropriate subject for this volume in honour of Lambert Isebaert. The conversations during this banquet were as varied as erudite and mainly deal with linguistic and literary issues. In general, they show a remarkable intellectual versatility that again perfectly fits in with the honorand of this volume.

The ancient banquet took place in Athens, nearly two millennia ago, on the occasion of the festival of the Muses, and is recorded in the last book of Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales*. It was organized by Ammonius, a well-respected society figure and Plutarch's teacher. Relying on various works of Plutarch, we can gain a detailed idea of Ammonius' intellectual profile. He

appears as a Platonist philosopher with a notable interest for metaphysics and religious topics, endorsing a radical distinction between the phenomenal world of becoming (about which no secure knowledge can be gained) and the divine, intelligible world of true being¹. Ammonius was also politically active: three times general in Athens², he played a prominent part in the local administration of the polis.

After a literary contest in the school of Diogenes, Ammonius has invited the successful teachers to dinner³. The company of symposiasts consists of many learned, cultivated people. As usual in Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales*, we have to do with distinguished members of the intellectual elite and the aristocratic upper-class: scholars and φιλόλογοι, grammarians and teachers of rhetoric, specialists of poetry and literature, but also philosophers, musicians, doctors, geometers and politicians. In short, Ammonius' banquet introduces us to the contemporary high society of πεπαιδευμένοι.

Organizing a dinner party for teachers is, however, a tricky business. The competition and mutual rivalry between different teachers indeed risks forcing its way into the banquet and marring its amiable atmosphere by sharp discussions⁴. Ammonius is faced with this problem and has to put out more than one fire. When he sees that things are getting out of control, he asks Erato to sing to the lyre, whereupon the latter begins with the opening of Hesiod's *Opera* about different kinds of strife⁵. This is an apt choice indeed, and Ammonius uses this opportunity to start a conversation about opportune and inopportune quotations. In this way, he manages to restore peace⁶. Yet the danger is not over and the situation poses a real threat of new conflicts, even more so given the custom at the festival of the Muses of determining by lot who should propose a problem to whom. This practice might give way to close colleagues once again clashing with one another. Hesiod was well aware that men of the same trade often quarrel and that "potter is angry with potter and builder with builder"⁷. Centuries later, nothing really changed: *nil noui sub sole!*

1. See esp. J. OPSOMER (2009).

2. Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.*, 720C; cf. also 736D; S.-T. TEODORSSON (1996), p. 171-182. Ammonius' name also appears on an inscription from Eleusis; see esp. C. P. JONES (1967); cf. B. PUECH (1992), p. 4835-4836.

3. *Quaest. conv.*, 736D.

4. *Quaest. conv.*, 736E. Such competition often occurs in Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales*; see L. VAN DER STOCKT (2000), p. 95; J. KÖNIG (2011), p. 189; P. A. STADTER (2011), p. 245.

5. *Quaest. conv.*, 736E (with reference to Hesiod, *Op.*, 11).

6. *Quaest. conv.*, 737D.

7. Hesiod, *Op.*, 25. Plutarch quotes the verse in *De tranq. an.*, 473A and also refers to it in *De cap. ex inim.*, 92A.

Ammonius, however, is wise enough to prevent such conflicts from the very beginning. He cleverly proposes that the order of speaking should not be determined by lot but that a geometer should propose a question to a grammarian and a musician to a teacher of rhetoric, and vice versa⁸. Again, Ammonius thus shows himself an excellent symposiarch⁹. He never forgets that the final goal of a banquet is friendship¹⁰ and therefore anticipates quarrels and takes care that the conversation partners interact with courtesy and benevolence. We join the discussion at the moment when the first question is raised.

1. The problem: why is the alpha placed first in the alphabet?

It is the geometer Hermeias who asks the grammarian Protogenes why the alpha is placed first in the alphabet¹¹. For several reasons, it qualifies as an excellent problem. To begin with, Hermeias takes into account Protogenes' field of competence. He does not belong to those scholars who are so pre-occupied with their own business that they can at dinner only talk about what they are doing themselves and also bother their interlocutors with these topics, but he comes out of his comfort zone by showing an interest in Protogenes' domain. Moreover, Hermeias' question meets Plutarch's own criteria for good sympotic questions. These criteria can be found in the programmatic first *Quaestio* of the work. There, "Plutarch"¹² argues:

The matters of inquiry [τὰς ζητήσεις] must be in themselves rather simple and easy [ὑγροτέρας], the topics familiar, the subjects for investigation suitably uncomplicated, so that the less intellectual guests may neither be stifled nor turned away¹³.

Hermeias' question is a beautiful example of such ζητήσεις ὑγρότεραι. It is "fluid" in the sense that it has every potential to arouse the curiosity of

8. *Quaest. conv.*, 737E.

9. See esp. *Quaest. conv.*, 1, 4 (620A-622B), where Plutarch elaborates his own view of an ideal symposiarch. See on this *Quaestio* M. VAMVOURI RUFFY (2012), p. 37-61; short discussions also in P. A. STADTER (1999), p. 483-485, and ID. (2009), p. 125-126.

10. L. VAN DER STOCKT (2000), p. 94.

11. *Quaest. conv.*, 737E. Hermeias is only known from this section of the *Quaestiones convivales*. On Protogenes, who also appears elsewhere in Plutarch's works, see *infra*, p. 290-291.

12. In this article, "Plutarch" refers to Plutarch as a character in the *Quaestiones convivales*, whereas Plutarch (without inverted commas) refers to the author.

13. *Quaest. conv.*, 614D. The *Quaestio* is discussed in D. M. SCHENKEVELD (1996) and F. KLOTZ (2014), p. 210-214. The translations of Plutarchan passages are borrowed from the Loeb Classical Library (sometimes slightly modified), those of the *Scholia Londinensia* on Dionysius Thrax are my own.

all listeners and thus easily spreads over the company¹⁴. We may indeed presume that everybody, even the less educated, may be interested in the answer and that all thus attentively follow the conversation. In that sense, Hermeias' intriguing question also contributes to the feelings of friendship between those present, and thus to the success of Ammonius' dinner.

2. The answer of Protogenes

Protogenes is not at a loss for an answer. His reply to Hermeias' question consists of three successive argumentative steps:

(1) First, there was every justification [τῷ δικαιοτάτῳ λόγῳ] for the vowels' taking precedence of the consonants and semivowels; (2) then among the vowels some were long, some short, and others, the so-called ambiguous, long and short; the last were naturally superior by reason of this capacity, (3) and among them, in turn, the leading position belonged to the one that could be prefixed to either, but suffixed to neither, of the others. *Alpha* was of this nature; if placed after *iota* or *upsilon* it refused, he said, to come to terms or fall in with them, to effect the formation of a single syllable from the two vowels; it sprang away, as it were, in distaste, and always tried to make its own start. On the other hand, if given a position before whichever you pleased of the other two, it made use of them, as they harmoniously followed its lead, to form syllables of words¹⁵.

After adding a few out of countless examples to illustrate his point (αὔριον, αὐλεῖν, Αἴαντος, αἰδεῖσθαι), Protogenes concludes that the alpha is like a competitor in the pentathlon: as it has gained three victories, it rightly occupies the first place¹⁶.

Protogenes' theory is introduced by Plutarch as the reason given in the school (τὴν ἐν ταῖς σχολαῖς λεγομένην [αἰτίαν]). It is interesting to see that the *Scholia Londinensia* on the grammar of Dionysius Thrax offers some parallels, as it offers no less than fourteen different explanations:

- 1) The explanation proposed by Protogenes (485, 3-13 Hilgard).
- 2) The alpha is found at the end of all parts of speech: nouns (Μοῦσα), verbs (τέτυφα), participles (τετυφῖα), the article (τά), pronouns (ἐμέ), prepositions (ἀνά), adverbs (ἄναντα), and conjunctions (ἀλλά) (485, 13-19 Hilgard).
- 3) All other letters end in alpha: βῆτα, γάμμα (485, 19-20 Hilgard).

14. See on this concept of ζητήσεις ὑγροτέρας M. VAMVOURI RUFFY (2012), p. 67-75.

15. *Quaest. conv.*, 737EF.

16. *Quaest. conv.*, 738A; cf. S.-T. TEODORSSON (1996), p. 311 (with further literature): "A competitor who scored a victory in three events won the competition as a whole".

4) Alpha was found first, and therefore it is actually called alpha, for ἀλφεῖν means “to find” (485, 21-23 Hilgard; cf. also 484, 20-21 and 488, 13 Hilgard).

5) The theory of Athenaeus: the alpha consists of three lines (Α), and three is the beginning of multitude, and thus of all the letters (485, 23-24 Hilgard).

6) Some of the vowels are pronounced with open lips, such as the η, others with closed lips, such as the υ and the ο. The alpha is pronounced through a combination of both movements (τὴν κατ’ ἀμφοτέρα κίνησιν) (485, 24-28 Hilgard).

7) The alpha was found by the Phoenicians, who call the house “alpha”. It is placed first because Hesiod places the house first (485, 28-31 Hilgard).

8) Children use α while crying (485, 31-32 Hilgard).

9) It begins and ends with itself (485, 32-33 Hilgard; cf. also 196, 21-23 and 484, 8-11 Hilgard).

10) The alpha is the sign of the unit, which is the beginning of number. This explanation is explicitly rejected by the scholiast (τοῦτο δὲ ψευδές) on the ground that the alpha was discovered first and only then became the characteristic of the unit (492, 15-18 Hilgard).

11) The letters with two syllables were placed before those of one syllable, and of these, the alpha is placed first because it can end all singular nouns – masculine (ἰππῶτα νεφεληγερέτα), feminine (Μοῦσα) and neuter (βῆμα) – as well as dual (Ἀτρεῖδα) and plural (βήματα) (292, 18-27 Hilgard).

12) The alpha has most powers: in Doric, it can take the place of the ε (e.g. Ἄρταμις instead of Ἄρτεμις) and the η (μᾶνις instead of μῆνις) (492, 27-29 Hilgard).

13) It can have seven different meanings: negation, emphasis, together, evil, few, gathering, and redundancy (492, 30-31 Hilgard).

14) The arrangement of the letters follows that of the numbers, alpha being 1, beta 2 (496, 27-28 Hilgard).

This impressive collection of ancient scholarship¹⁷ shows that we are dealing with a much discussed problem that led to many different solutions throughout the centuries. The learned scholiast indeed provides a full overview of a particularly rich tradition and this largely neglected evidence throws an interesting new light on Protogenes’ answer to Hermeias’ question.

To begin with, Protogenes’ theory corresponds to the first view mentioned in the *Scholia Londinensia*. This suggests that Protogenes, falling back on a well-known, standard view, opts for an easy solution. He could have done much more, as the above list of alternative explanations demonstrates, yet for whatever reason, he limits himself to one simple answer.

17. For a good introduction to this kind of scholarship, see E. DICKEY (2007).

Several theories about the place of the alpha will be mentioned by other participants later in the discussion, and we will have to come back to them in due course, but Protogenes does not allude to them.

Furthermore, he does not even argue the different steps of his theory. He apparently finds it self-evident that vowels should precede semivowels and consonants, but his claim is nowhere justified beyond the general phrase τῷ δικαιοτάτῳ λόγῳ. The scholiast argues his case more carefully, pointing out that the primacy of the vowels rests on their capacity of bringing forward a sound themselves¹⁸. Moreover, if the vowels should indeed be placed before semivowels and consonants, then why should the alpha not be followed immediately by the other vowels rather than by a mute consonant, the beta? Again, we have to turn to the *Scholia Londinensia* for further clarification¹⁹. A similar objection can be raised against Protogenes' second step: if the ambiguous vowels' claim to pre-eminence is indeed valid, why is the alpha not immediately followed by iota and upsilon?

All this suggests that Protogenes is not the most painstaking thinker. He is a competent schoolmaster, no doubt, familiar with the basics of his own domain, but he is not really interested in in-depth inquiry. This is precisely how he appears elsewhere in Plutarch's works too. During another banquet, the physician Nicias of Nicopolis criticizes Plato's conviction that drink passes through the lungs²⁰. Protogenes seconds this criticism with a learned reference to Homeric verses that imply a distinction between the oesophagus and the windpipe²¹. Protogenes thus actively contributes to the conversation in a constructive way, and his argument rests on a very careful and detailed reading of Homer. Yet he also stays on his own domain – as, indeed, he does in the discussion about the alpha. In a certain sense, this is to his credit. As a matter of fact, grammarians more than once appear in a negative light in Plutarch's *Quaestiones convivales*, usually because they ex-

18. *Schol. Lond. in Dion. Thrac.*, 485, 3-5 Hilgard: ἐχρῆν τὰ στοιχεῖα οὐκ ἀπὸ συμφώνου ἀλλ' ἀπὸ φωνήεντος ἄρξασθαι, ἐπεὶ τὰ φωνήεντα τιμιώτερα εἰσι, καθὸ καθ' ἑαυτὰ φωνὴν ἀποτελεῖ. See also Lucian, *Iudic. voc.*, 5.

19. *Schol. Lond. in Dion. Thrac.*, 492, 32-34 Hilgard: the fact that the alpha is followed by a consonant hints at the combination of consonants and vowels (αἰνιττόμενος τὴν τῶν φωνήεντων πρὸς τὰ σύμφωνα σύνταξιν). In this way, juxtaposing all the vowels one after the other at the beginning of the alphabet was no option (μὴ δεῖ ἐξῆς πλείω φωνήεντα συντάττεσθαι).

20. *Quaest. conv.*, 697F-698D. The *Quaestio* is discussed in Aulus Gellius, 17.11; cf. F. KLOTZ, K. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ (2011), p. 235-236.

21. *Quaest. conv.*, 698DE, quoting Homer, *Iliad*, 22, 325 and 328-329 (and probably 24, 641-642; see the text critical note of S.-T. TEODORSSON [1996], p. 22).

ceed their competence and thus cause conflicts²². Protogenes cannot be blamed for that: he contributes to the discussion what he can offer from his own expertise but avoids overplaying his hands.

Yet this strict limitation to his own field of expertise also shows a certain degree of narrow-mindedness. Protogenes indeed seems to lack the spirit of the true researcher. We have seen that the school theory which he proposes, though ingenious, rests without argument. More fundamentally, we may even wonder whether it offers a real answer to the question. Again, a parallel from another *Quaestio* may throw further light on this matter. At a dinner party in the house of Sospis, the conversation is about the reason why wreaths of palm are awarded at all athletic festivals. Protogenes intervenes with the remark that teachers of rhetoric are not the only ones who are able to discuss the issue. He recalls how he has recently read in a history of Athens that Theseus tore off a branch of the sacred palm tree when he founded a new athletic competition in Delos. And this, so he adds, is the reason why such a branch is called *σπάδιξ*²³. This is an interesting piece of knowledge, characteristic of the grammarian's general erudition, and not irrelevant in the context of the general discussion about palm trees. In that sense, Protogenes' intervention bears some resemblance with his reference to Homer in the discussion about drink and the lungs. Yet essentially, his contribution does not provide a deeper insight into the question under discussion. Praxiteles rightly points out that they want to know why Theseus tore off a branch of the palm tree rather than of laurel or olive²⁴. This is a very pertinent remark indeed! Protogenes, for all his erudition and familiarity with literature, often stays at a fairly superficial level, adds some learned comments borrowed from earlier authors, but never really delves into the problem; in short, he is no *ζητητικός*²⁵. This also appears from his answer to Hermeias' question about the position of the alpha. His explanation casts light upon the peculiar nature of the alpha, yet the question remains as to whether this really explains the choice for the alpha as opening letter of the alphabet. Protogenes never refers to the person of the *στοιχειώτης* and his concerns. His view, then, is elaborated *ad hoc* and *a posteriori*.

22. For the generally negative view of the grammarian in Plutarch's works (and particularly in the *Quaestiones convivales*), see esp. K. ESHLEMAN (2013); cf. also M. HORSTER (2008) [p. 620 on Protogenes].

23. *Quaest. conv.*, 723F-724A (= *FGrHist* IIIb, 329 F 5); cf. also Pausanias, VIII, 48, 3.

24. *Quaest. conv.*, 724A.

25. The notion of *ζήτησις* is of paramount importance in Plutarch's conception of philosophy; see, e.g., J. OPSOMER (1998), p. 189 and 191; M. BONAZZI (2008); E. KECHAGIA (2011), p. 80 and 93-104; G. ROSKAM (2017), p. 200-203.

This, however, holds true for nearly all the theories mentioned in the *Scholia Londinensia*. In that sense, this ahistorical approach does not seem to reflect Protogenes' intellectual limitations but rather the bias of Greek grammatical thinking in general. This, apparently, is the way in which ancient Greek grammarians approached this problem.

3. The proposal of Ammonius

When Protogenes has finished, Ammonius turns to "Plutarch" and asks him whether he, as a Boeotian, would rather support Cadmus the Phoenician:

Aren't you, as a Boeotian, going to give any support to Cadmus, who is said [φρασι] to have placed *alpha* first because it is the Phoenician name for an ox, which they reckoned not the second or the third, as Hesiod did, but the first of necessities²⁶?

This is a short but interesting intervention. First, Ammonius once again shows himself an ideal symposiarch. While seeing the limits of Protogenes' explanation, he does not attack him but prefers to suggest another answer thus keeping the discussion going. Moreover, his intervention also characterizes him as an ideal teacher. Indeed, he addresses the young "Plutarch", one of his students at that moment, and stimulates him to develop this view²⁷. Ammonius thus provides the impetus for further inquiry and discussion and in this way offers his gifted student the opportunity to develop his own talents²⁸.

Second, Ammonius' theory is intelligent and proves that he is familiar with the general debate about the issue. The vague reference to earlier sources (φρασι) indeed suggests that he does not come up with his own theory but like Protogenes makes use of a theory that has been proposed before. As a matter of fact, his theory also occurs in the above list of the *Scholia Londinensia* (number 7). The full version is as follows:

Or because it is an invention of the Phoenicians, and the Phoenicians call the house "alpha". Since Hesiod says: "first a house and a woman". Therefore the alpha is put first²⁹.

This passage contains all the elements that constitute the core of Ammonius' explanation: the Phoenicians as the inventors of the Greek alphabet, the connection with Hesiod, and the meaning of the alpha in the

26. *Quaest. conv.*, 738A.

27. On Ammonius as an ideal teacher, see G. ROSKAM (2004), p. 108-113.

28. In this, *experto crede*, he was a far precursor of the honorand of this volume!

29. *Schol. Lond. in Dion. Thrac.*, 485, 28-31 Hilgard (with reference to Hesiod, *Op.*, 405): ἢ ὅτι Φοινίκων ἐστὶν εὐρημα, Φοίνικες δὲ τὴν οἰκίαν ἄλφα λέγουσιν· ἐπεὶ οὖν Ἡσίοδος ἔφη οἶκον μὲν πρότεστα γυναῖκά τε, διὰ τοῦτο τὸ ἄ πρῶτον τέτακται.

Phoenician language. Yet there is also an important difference. The scholiast interprets the position of the Phoenicians through the lens of Hesiod's saying, which results in an *interpretatio Graeca*: alpha means "house" because Hesiod puts house first. The scholiast, for all his learning, here makes an obvious mistake. Ammonius does better. He knows the correct meaning of the alpha, that is, "ox"³⁰, and therefore also knows that the passage from Hesiod is not directly relevant. His reference to it has no longer any argumentative power, nor should it be regarded as a mere rhetorical *flosculus*, but it is added as a tacit and erudite correction of the tradition.

Finally, Ammonius' answer improves on that of Protogenes in the sense that it does not merely explain the initial position of the alpha through *a posteriori* reflections on its character but rather places the whole discussion into its proper perspective, that is, the origin of the alphabet. The place of the alpha should indeed be traced back to the decision of the στοιχειώτης. Ammonius does not deal with the matter as if the letters were fallen from the sky³¹ but points to the Phoenician origin³² and tries to find out Cadmus' motivations. From a methodological point of view, this is a sound and promising approach that would definitely repay further elaboration. Ammonius' proposal to his student is an excellent one.

4. The view of "Plutarch"

Yet "Plutarch" does not accept his teacher's present. Rather than developing Ammonius' suggestion, he comes with a different explanation which he borrows from his grandfather:

My grandfather Lamprias, you see, used to say that of all articulate sounds the first to be naturally uttered is that which has the phonetic value of *alpha*. He argued that the breath in the mouth is mainly shaped by the movements of the lips; their first movement is their vertical separation as they are opened, which emits this sound, an absolutely simple one that requires no effort, and neither asks for nor submits to assistance from the tongue, being pronounced while that organ remains in its original position, which is of course the reason why babies utter this sound first³³.

30. In fact, "house" is the name of the second letter of the alphabet, i.e. "beta" (cf. *Bethlehem*).

31. A theory that was actually defended by some people; see *Schol. Lond. in Dion. Thrac.*, 182, 18-19 Hilgard; cf. also 185, 20 Hilgard.

32. That the Greeks borrowed their alphabet from the Phoenicians was a theory that was often accepted in antiquity. Herodotus tells that the Phoenicians who came with Cadmus introduced the alphabet into Greece (5, 58) and this view appears frequently in later sources; see esp. J. SCHNEIDER (2004), p. 126-133, for a rich overview; much material can also be found in S. J. V. MALLOCH (2013), p. 223-224.

33. *Quaest. conv.*, 738AB.

If Ammonius is an ideal teacher, then “Plutarch” in several respects qualifies as the ideal student. He is not content with slavishly parroting his teacher’s ready-made answer but follows his own path, which clearly suggests a critical mind and an independent judgement. At the same time, he makes it clear that he does not propose his own view but rather sides with his grandfather, thus showing a respect for his grandparents that is fitting for a young man and adding praiseworthy *pietas* to critical acuteness.

The core of the explanation which “Plutarch” here proposes is that alpha is the first sound that is naturally uttered. This observation, however, is further supported by several traditional arguments. The *Scholia* on Dionysius Thrax indeed show that “Plutarch” incorporates two different theories in his view. The argument from the movements of the lips returns in the above list from the *Scholia Londinensia* as number 6. The scholiast there actually defends a more sophisticated view. He argues that some vowels (such as the ēta) are uttered by opening the lips, whereas others (such as the upsilon and the omicron) are pronounced by closing the lips. The alpha, however, needs the two movements (τὴν κατ’ ἀμφοτέρα κινήσιν ἔχει) and is therefore placed first³⁴. This is an odd theory, and the more simple claim of “Plutarch” that the mere opening of the lips suffices to pronounce the alpha may well be yet another tacit correction of the scholarly tradition. Moreover, this view enables him to combine his explanation with another observation, that is, the crying of babies. This element is mentioned by the scholiast as well (number 8 in the above list), yet whereas the scholiast juxtaposes the empirical observations regarding the lips and the babies as two entirely different explanations, “Plutarch” succeeds in combining them into one coherent theory.

And that is not all. “Plutarch” develops his explanation with further arguments:

And that, he would say, is why the perception of the sound of the voice is called *aíein* (to hear), and there are many parallels, for example *áidein* (to sing), *aulein* (to play a wind-instrument), *alalázein* (to yell). And I believe (οἶμαι) that *airein* (to raise) and *anoígein* (to open) are also names appropriate to the opening and raising of the lips that accompanies the emission from the mouth of the sound *a*. For this reason all the mute letters, with one exception, have names that employ an added *alpha*, as a kind of light to their darkness. Only *pi* lacks this sound, for *phi* and *chi* are to be counted as aspirated *pi* and *kappa*³⁵.

The different etymologies proposed in this passage have no parallel in the *Scholia* on Dionysius Thrax. This suggests that they reflect Plutarch’s own

34. *Schol. Lond. in Dion. Thrac.*, 485, 24-28 Hilgard.

35. *Quaest. conv.*, 738BC.

interests³⁶, and it is perhaps no coincidence that “Plutarch” here completes his grandfather’s explanation. The emphatic οἶμαι indeed marks the transition from Lamprias’ theory to the view of “Plutarch” himself. “Plutarch” thus also contributes something of his own, and this addition again adds to the general coherence of his explanation, as it has to do with the movement of the lips.

His last point, concerning the names of the mute letters, returns in the *Scholia* (number 3 in the above list), yet here too, “Plutarch” is more careful than the scholiast. Whereas the latter oversimplifies the matter by vaguely alluding to all the other letters, “Plutarch” is much more accurate: he correctly points out that he is only speaking of the mutes and that even this group still has one exception. The ἀκρίβεια of “Plutarch” is clearly on a level with that of his teacher Ammonius.

The explanation proposed by “Plutarch”, then, is erudite, well-argued and coherent, yet from a methodological point of view, it resembles that of Protogenes rather than that of Ammonius. Again, we are dealing with an explanation *ad hoc* and *a posteriori* that brackets the relevance of the στοιχειώτης. Nevertheless, the theory of “Plutarch” has some advantages as compared to that of Protogenes. The initial position of the alpha is now not based on a quite sophisticated theory concerning vowels, semivowels and consonants but on the simple fact that the alpha is, in a way, the most natural sound. This makes the hypothesis, and the additional *a posteriori* arguments in support of it, much more plausible.

5. The position of Plutarch

The question remains, though, whether Plutarch in the end sides with “Plutarch”. Nowhere in this *Quaestio*, Plutarch explicitly gives preference to one explanation. Yet we find a general pattern in his oeuvre according to which the last answer to such questions is the most convincing³⁷. The first tend to introduce the reader to the problem by laying bare its different dimensions. Gradually, more essential aspects are dealt with, before the last answer provides the most plausible and rich explanation. Repeatedly, this final alternative is also characterized as Plutarch’s own contribution to the debate³⁸. In this *Quaestio* as well, we have seen that the last answer, which

36. For Plutarch’s great interest in etymological thinking, see esp. A. STROBACH (1997), p. 55-141.

37. See, e.g., J. OPSOMER (1996), p. 83 and ID. (1998), p. 203; M. MEEUSEN (2016), p. 88-89.

38. It is often introduced by phrases such as ὄρα δὲ μὴ ἢ σκόπει δὲ μὴ; cf. J. OPSOMER (1996), p. 77; see, however, also the caveat in M. MEEUSEN (2016), p. 90-91.

is ascribed to the young “Plutarch”, in several respects surpasses that of Protogenes.

Yet it would be rash to conclude that Plutarch regarded the last explanation as the last word on the matter and that he thus rejected the previous alternatives. As a rule, Plutarchan *Quaestiones* show a subtle combination of an ascending order of plausibility and a fundamental respect for the value of every explanation³⁹. In other words, the answers proposed by Protogenes and Ammonius, far from being worthless, shed light on the problem from their own perspective and therefore also deserve mention. Protogenes recalls several typical features of the alpha. His discussion of the alpha is not wrong, of course, and underscores the special place of the letter vis-à-vis other letters. Ammonius’ theory better takes into account the question of the origin, thus filling an important lacuna left by the other views. These explanations, then, contain significant elements that are not tackled by the young “Plutarch”. All three answers are interesting. To a certain extent, they do not exclude one another, yet they cannot be combined into one oversimplifying theory either.

This conclusion is further corroborated by the striking reaction of Hermeias: he replies that he accepts both explanations⁴⁰. This evaluation shows a truly symposiastic spirit. As so often in Plutarch’s *Quaestiones convivales*, we witness a conversation among friends. In such discussions, theories are seldom rejected. The friends usually approve the view of the speaker before adding complementary arguments or putting forward a different hypothesis⁴¹. Yet Hermeias’ acceptance is not merely a matter of courtly *politesse* among friends: it should also be understood against the background of Plutarch’s “zetetic” approach, that is, his careful inquiry into all aspects of a given problem. Hermeias indeed shows such an approach by not agreeing with just one view but recognizing the relevance of different points of view.

Yet Hermeias’ evaluation is also surprising: he indeed accepts *both* (ἀμφοτέρους) theories, whereas we have seen that the discussion has actually yielded *three* explanations. Hermeias thus ignores Ammonius’ theory. The explanations proposed by Protogenes and “Plutarch” both share the same *a posteriori* approach and can easily be regarded as complementary. Ammonius’ theory, however, is different. Moreover, it is never really elaborated. These factors probably explain why it is overlooked by Hermeias.

39. Cf. G. ROSKAM (2011), p. 425 and 430; ID. (2017), p. 201-203.

40. *Quaest. conv.*, 738D: ἀμφοτέρους ἀποδέχεσθαι τοὺς λόγους.

41. L. VAN DER STOCKT (2000), p. 94.

Nevertheless, in this respect his evaluation is a bit negligent, and Plutarch's ζήτησις proves more painstaking than that of Hermeias.

Moreover, that is not the end of the discussion. As a matter of fact, there is still a fourth explanation to follow, after a discussion about the number of the letters in the alphabet. "Plutarch" and Hermeias deal with this issue in the next *Quaestio*, but this need not detain us here. When Hermeias concludes, Zopyrio the grammarian dismisses all the foregoing speculations as utter nonsense⁴². In his view, both the number of the letters and their order is a matter of pure coincidence⁴³. This, of course, is a completely different explanation. In view of the previous erudite hypotheses and the many theories mentioned in the *Scholia* on Dionysius Thrax, this solution is characterized by a challenging, even offensive down-to-earthness. All erudition now becomes mere φλυαρία, the over-subtle *a posteriori* rationalization of mere coincidence.

In my view, Zopyrio's intervention is a particularly telling illustration of Plutarch's open-mindedness. Plutarch, indeed, was not afraid of the truth. He did his best to explain the phenomenon as well as he could, yet he knew that he could never claim absolute certainty. Every explanation is plausible at best⁴⁴ and thus it can never be really excluded that it is all just a matter of coincidence. Rather than explaining this away or keeping silent about it, Plutarch places it at the very end of the whole discussion. We have seen that this is usually the place for the most plausible alternative. The theory of the young "Plutarch", which concluded the talk about the initial position of the alpha, now receives a crucial addendum in the retrospective criticism of Zopyrio. This is an important caveat, a sober warning and a challenge for further thinking. Plutarch realized very well that there are no easy solutions for difficult problems and he did not write his *Quaestiones convivales* for easy-going readers.

6. Conclusion

Zopyrio's reaction is not the end of the banquet. Maximus, a teacher of rhetoric, puts him a question regarding the interpretation of a passage from Homer and the intellectual conversation goes on for a long time. The whole

42. *Quaest. conv.*, 738F-739A (φλυαρίαν τὰ τοιαῦτα πολλὴν ἀπεκάλει). Zopyrio is not known from other sources. S.-T. TEODORSSON (1996), p. 320, suggests that he was an Epicurean on the basis of Plutarch's use of the verb καταγεῶν, but this is too weak a basis to rely on.

43. *Quaest. conv.*, 739A.

44. On the importance of plausibility (τὸ πιθανόν or τὸ εἰκός), see, e.g., E. KECHAGIA (2011), p. 95-96 and 99-104; M. MEEUSEN (2014), p. 331-334, and (2016), p. 321-328.

book, in which the discussion about the place of the letter alpha is only one highlight, shows the impressive erudition of Plutarch. It is to be placed in a world of refined intellectuals who in their conversations over wine explore all kinds of paths that may lead to deeper insight and who combine remarkable erudition and virtuosity with conviviality and *savoir vivre*. It is not difficult to find in these refined and highly cultured *πεπαιδευμένοι* the ancient precursors of Lambert Isebaert, the brilliant and amiable honorand of this volume.

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