The Oracular \(\textit{ei}\)

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IN PLUTARCH’S \textit{De E apud Delphos}, the priest Nicander offers this explanation of the \(\textit{E}\) inscribed on the Delphic temple:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{\(\text{ἐστι γάρ, ώς ὑπολαμβάνονσι Δελφοὶ ... σχῆμα καὶ μορφὴ τῆς πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἐνετέβευσι, καὶ τάξιν ἠγεμονικὴν ἐν τοῖς ἐρω-
}
\text{τήμασιν ἔχει τῶν χρωμένων ἐκάστοτε καὶ διαπυθανομένων ἐi
}
\text{νικήσουσιν, ἐi γαμήσουσιν, ἐi συμφέρει πλεῖν, ἐi γεωργεῖν, ἐi ἀποδημεῖν (Mor. 386b-c).}
\end{align*}\]

For it is, as the Delphians assume ... the figure and form of the consultation of the god, and it holds the first place in every question of those who consult the oracle and inquire \textit{if} they shall be victorious, \textit{if} they shall marry, \textit{if} it is to their advantage to sail the sea, \textit{if} to take to farming, \textit{if} to go abroad.\(^1\)

It is surprising that Nicander would have seen an explanation for the unknown and mysterious \(\textit{E}\) in something so commonplace as the relational particle which, in normal usage, subordinates a question to a verb of inquiry—a particle used not only at Delphi but in everyday speaking and writing as well; his interlocutors dismiss the suggestion immediately. But it is a significant indication of the verbal structure of at least one kind of petition made to the oracle, in which \(\textit{ei}\) was indeed the first word of independent questions. Examples of this kind of petition are uncommon because the emphasis everywhere is on the responses rather than the questions; moreover, when our sources include the question, they almost invariably cast it in indirect form, thereby tending to obscure the original wording.

An Eleusinian inscription of 352 B.C. offers an interesting exception (\textit{IG} II\(^2\) 204 [\textit{Syll.}\(^3\) 204]). This lengthy text explains how the Athenians are to ask at Delphi whether they should leave uncultivated a particular plot of land at Eleusis. The portion relevant to our discussion reads as follows (23–30):

\[\text{γράißαι δὲ τὸν} \gammaραμματέα τῆς βουλῆς ἐiς δύο κα-
\text{[π]ιτέρῳ ὅσῳ καὶ [ὁμοίῳ, ἐiς μὲν] τὸν ἐτερον' ἐi λῶίν καὶ ἄμεί-
\text{[νό]ν ἐστι τῶι δήμῳ τῶι Ἀθηναῖων μος]θοῦν τὸμ βασιλέα τά νῦ-}\]

The inscription then explains that after the two pieces of tin have been wrapped in wool so as to render them indistinguishable from each other, one is to be placed in a silver jar, the other in a gold jar. These jars are to be sealed and left in Athens while a specially selected embassy journeys to Delphi to ask the Pythia which inscription should dictate the Athenians' course of action, that in the silver or that in the gold jar.

H. W. Parke correctly points out that "the very fact that the whole procedure was described in such detail in a public decree, instead of merely stating the questions to be asked, certainly implies that it was a highly exceptional method." But in view of Nicander's interpretation of the symbolic E, and the fact that the phrase λών καὶ ᾧμεινον is so common in oracular petitions as to be formulaic, it seems that the inscriptions on the tin plates preserve the verbal structure of one of the standard forms of oracular inquiry, however exceptional the use of sealed jars and alternative questions may have been. Apparently this standard form was simply subsumed into the system the Athenians had devised to obviate the possibility of fraud. Were this not the case—were, that is, the entire system a novelty—one would expect statements rather than questions on the tin plates, since one of them was to serve, in effect, as the answer of the Pythia.

Many of the small lead tablets excavated at Dodona preserve oracular petitions in their original form, with the structure έι + interrogative:

_αι τυχαίχα μοι ἀ ἐπιτροπεία τὰν ἔχω γαμῶν Λυκίδας;_"
This construction seems to be an abbreviated form of the structure exhibited on other tablets where the inquiry is introduced by the name of the petitioner and a verb of asking in the third person:

τούχα ἀγαθά. ἡ τυγχάνουμι καὶ ἐμπορευόμενος
ὁπες καὶ δοκησί σύμφορον ἐμειν, καὶ ἄγων, τὴν καὶ δοκῆι
ἀμάται τέχναι χρεόμενος; ⁶

In accounting for the presence of the interrogative particle ei in both the abbreviated and the full texts, Pomtow asserts that η can follow ερωτῆ because “der schreiber alles vorhergehende als formelle überschrift faszte und die eigentliche frage erst mit η beginnend ansah.” ¹⁰ Albert Thumb more correctly observed that in both kinds of text the indirect interrogative (Attic ei) is to be understood. ¹¹ This view is substantiated by the use of ei in some of the petitions, for while η and ei can interchange on the phonological level, ei is morphologically equivalent to ei, not to η. ¹²

The book of fate known today as the Sortes Astrampsychi also contains queries in the form of ei + seemingly direct question, such

⁶ Parke (supra n.2) 269 no. 19; cf. H. R. Pomtow, “Die Orakelinschriften von Dodona,” Jahrb.f.cl.Phil. 29 (1883) 327f. no. 17.
⁷ Parke (supra n.2) 269f. no. 21; Evangelides, Praktika (1932) 59 no. 5, dates the text to the fourth century B.C.
⁸ Parke (supra n.2) 266 no. 11; Syll. ¹¹ 1163 dates the text to the second century B.C.
⁹ Parke (supra n.2) no. 17.
¹⁰ Pomtow (supra n.6) 321f.
¹¹ Handbuch der griechischen Dialekte I (Heidelberg 1932) 315.
¹² See Thumb (supra n.11) I 74, 101; II 47; C. D. Buck, Greek Dialects (Chicago 1955) 105 §134.1.
¹³ The editio princeps of Rudolph Hercher, Astrampsychi oraculorum decades CIII, Jahresbericht über das Königsliche Joachimsthalische Gymnasium (Berlin 1863), is superseded by G. M. Browne and R. Stewart, edd., Sortes Astrampsychi I: Ecdosis Prior (Leipzig 1983) and II: Ecdosis altera (Leipzig, forthcoming).
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as ει πλεύσω ἀκανθώνω; (12), εἰ ἀποδήμω; (17), εἰ γαμῶ καὶ συμφέρει μου; (21), εἰ εὐρίσκω δανείσασθαι ἀρτι; (25), εἰ ἐργαστήριον ἀνώτερο; (43). The similarity of these questions to those asked at Delphi and Dodona places the Sortes firmly in the oracular tradition.14

Just as in the case of the Dodona tablets Pomtow felt obliged to exclude the possibility of direct questions introduced by ει, so various explanations have been offered for the appearance of ει at the head of independent questions in the Sortes. Grenfell and Hunt (P.Oxy. XII 1477) suggested emending ει to ὅ. G. M. Browne, citing oracular petitions from Egypt, interpreted the questions as protases of conditional sentences, the apodoses of which were suppressed.15 Björck called them direct questions,16 while Hoogendijk and Clarysse view them as indirect interrogatives.17

None of these attempts to deal with the construction is altogether satisfactory. The parallels from Dodona and Delphi count against the emendation suggested by Grenfell and Hunt. It is also unlikely that the questions in the Sortes are derived from the system of oracular consultation employed in Egypt, since the salient features of that system (i.e., the apodosis of the conditional sentence, the negative formulation of the query, and the submission of the question on papyri or ostraca) are not to be found in the Sortes. Björck presents no support for his view except the bald assertion that “der Gebrauch kommt von alters her vor und ist im NT kein Semitisimus.”18 But while the use of ει in oracular petitions might be invoked as evidence against the supposed Semitic origin of ει as a direct interrogative in biblical texts, it is begging the question to argue in reverse fashion, i.e., that biblical examples of ει in direct questions allow one to justify the use of ει as a direct interrogative in the oracular texts: for the biblical usage is considered on good grounds by virtually every modern commentator to be a Semiticism.19 Finally, in labeling the ques-

14 Questions 12, 17, and 21 are paralleled, among other places, in Plut. Mor. 386B–C (cited above), question 25 in Mor. 408C (cited below), and question 43 in the third of the texts from Dodona cited above.
18 Björck (supra n.16) 94 n.2.
19 See, for instance, F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and F. Rehkopf, Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechischen (Göttingen 1976) 440.3 n.5; Nigel Turner, A Grammar of New Testament Greek (Edinburgh 1963) III 333, IV (1976) 54, 92; A. D. Robertson, A Grammar of the Greek New Testament (Nashville 1934) 916. In these sources it is ar-
tions of the Sortes as indirect, Hoogendijk and Clarysse fail to account for the omission of a verb of inquiry. However, they cite in their discussion another passage from Plutarch which, when pursued further, proves useful in explaining the anomalous ei used to introduce a direct question.

At De Pythiae oraculis 408c, Theon remarks that at Delphi the inquiries of private citizens usually concern slight and commonplace matters: ἐπὶ πράγματα μικρότερα καὶ δημοτικά ἐρωτήσεις ὁδὸν ἐν σχολῇ προτάσει, εἰ γαμητέον, εἰ πλεντέον, εἰ δανειστέον. The form of these questions and the allusion to school exercises show that Plutarch discerned a similarity between questions asked at Delphi and the rhetorical theses and hypotheses used in schools to sharpen students’ skill in deliberation. Both the thesis and the hypothesis are questions that can be answered yes or no; but the thesis is abstract in nature (that is, it does not concern a specific individual or circumstance), while the hypothesis deals with a concrete situation. The rhetor Theon offers this analysis:

οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο τῆς ὑποθέσεως διαφέρει [scil. ἡ θέσεις], πλὴν ὅτι προσώπων ὀρισμένων καὶ τόπων καὶ χρόνων καὶ τρόπων καὶ αἰτίας ἐστὶν ἀπαρέμφατον, οἷον θέσεις μὲν εἰ προσήκει πολυρκουμένοις στράτευμα πέμπειν εἰς τὴν ὑπερορίαν, ὑπόθεσις δὲ εἰ Ἀθηναίοις πολυρκουμένους ὑπὸ Πελοποννησίων εἰς Σκελείαν στράτευμα πέμπειν (Spengel, Rhet. II 61.6ff).

According to this scheme, the questions given as examples in Mor. 408c would be theses, since they are not person-relative, while most of the questions in the Sortes, as well as the oracular petitions cited above, would be hypotheses, because they deal with the case of a particular person, namely the individual consulting the book or the oracle.

In the rhetorical treatises, theses and hypotheses are often dependent on a verb such as ζητεῖ, e.g. ἐστω δ' οὖν ἡμὰς ζητεῖν, εἰ προ-
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νοεσθε θεοι τον κόσμον (Theon, in Spengel, Rhet. II 1126.2ff); but they are also commonly encountered in constructions where no such verb is present, as the following examples illustrate:


ουδεν μεντο διαφερει, εαυ τε ουτω λεγη τις, ει γαμητεον η ου, και παλιν, ει αιρετος ο γαμος η φευκτεος: εν γαρ και ταυτον έστι δια παντων τοτων το δηλούμενον (Theon: Spengel, Rhet. II 121.14ff).

sed tamen, ne me totum aegritudini dedam, sumpsi mihi quasdam tamquam, quae et temporum horum, ut et abducam animum a querehis et in eo ipso de quo agitare exercer. eae sunt huius modi: ει μενετον εν τη πατριδε τυραννουμενης αυτης: ει παντι τροποι τυραννοιδος καταλησεν πραγματετον, και μελη δια τοτο περι των διων η πολις κυνονεσεν. ει ευλαβητεον τον καταλυνοντα μη αυτος αρησται (Cicero: Att. 9.4).

This independent use is also evident in the titles of several rhetorical works of Plutarch: ει διδακτων η άρετη; (439Α), ει αυταρκης η κακια προς κακοδαιμονιαν; (498Α), ει πρεσβυτεροι πολιτετεον; (783Α), ει καλος ειρηνται το λαθε βωσας; (1128Α).20

There is a striking similarity between the rhetorical form as it appears in these passages and the questions of the Sortes and petitions with ει made to Greek oracles. As the passage from De Pythiae oraculis demonstrates, Plutarch was aware of this similarity; and it appears that the compiler (or a redactor) of the Sortes identified the questions in the work as hypotheses. In manuscripts ELM, we find as an incipit to the list of questions the heading αρχη των ζητησατων (κληρων in all other witnesses), and in the introductory epistle (missing in M) an explanation of the use of the book begins κειςθω ζητειν τινα ει προκόπτει εν τινι. In the rhetorical treatises, ζητησα often serves as a generic label for theses and hypotheses and, as noted above, one is said to investigate (ζητειν) these questions. Furthermore, some petitions in the Sortes—e.g. ει ευρω δανεισασθαι άρτο; (25), and ει ειπω την δικην; (51)—are clearly of a deliberative na-

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20 In addition to these surviving works, the so-called Lamprias catalogue lists the following titles: ει άρετη η ζητησα; (86), ει λογον έχει τα ζωα; (135), ει πασι συνυγορητεον; (156), ει δροσε γνωσθη η πολιτης προειδος δοι ου πονησει, ου πεισει; (164), περι τον γιωθ σαιατον και ει αθαναστος η ζυγη; (177), περι άρετης ει διδακτων η άρετη; (180), ει άμπρακτος ο περι παντων επεχθω; (210).
ture, suggesting that the author made no distinction between hypotheses and oracular questions.

The structural likeness and the witness of Astrampsychus or his redactor notwithstanding, the oracular petitions and most of the questions in the *Sortes* are not, in the technical sense, hypotheses: their intent is to obtain from a supernatural force information about what fate ordains in regard to some event or person, while the hypothesis is intended to elicit discussion about what is or what should be the case. Nonetheless, the thesis/hypothesis form is instructive as a syntactical parallel to the questions of the *Sortes* and the Greek oracles, for it shows that a question with *ei* can stand independently of a leading verb.

In these rhetorical forms, the deep structure is a dependent interrogative, since the *ei* is generated by ζητεω or some verbal equivalent, the force of which is felt even when the verb is omitted. However, in its surface structure the question is direct, because of the suppression of this governing verb. The evidence presented by these forms suggests that in the questions of the *Sortes* and in the direct questions with *ei* at Delphi and Dodona, we also have to do with an elliptical construction resulting from suppression of an element so closely associated with the form that it did not need to be expressed. The fact that some of the petitions on the Dodona tablets are in the form of indirect questions introduced by a verb of asking, with the name of the enquirer as subject, argues that the omitted element is a verb such as ἐρωτῶ. Thus, in a sense, both the views of Hoogendijk and Björck are partially correct: the questions in the *Sortes*, as well as their parallels from Delphi and Dodona, are indirect from a diachronic perspective, because in their deep structure they depend on a verb such as ἐρωτῶ; but synchronically they are direct, in that this verb has been omitted.