

Divine Discourses: Plutarch's 'Delphic Dialogues' and the Hermeneutical Process

In this paper, I argue that in his Delphic dialogues, Plutarch uses a specific type of dialectic to ask hermeneutic questions about the Delphic god, creating works that do not answer these questions for his readers, but stand as representatives of how one should undertake inquiry into the nature of the divine. I demonstrate that Plutarch uses the traditions and rituals surrounding the Delphic oracle, the role of the Pythia, and the nature and type of responses given as gateways to greater ontological understanding of the god. In the process, Plutarch produces texts that are more interested in the hermeneutical process, rather than the answers to the questions posed by the interlocutors. In *De E apud Delphos*, the setting and structure of the dialogue reveal to the reader the proper way to approach enigmatic and seemingly inexplicable problems, as Plutarch uses a dialogue to answer the question of the meaning of the E inscribed on the Temple of Apollo, and calls attention to this decision in the text. In so doing, Plutarch transforms the dialogue from a simple answer to a question into a teachable moment for both his internal and his external audiences. *De Pythiae oraculis* demonstrates how to have a productive dialogue, with the interlocutors working closely together to reach increasingly more nuanced answers to philosophical questions. Finally, *De defectu oraculorum* demonstrates what kinds of questions prompt good philosophical discussion, and how to go about answering them. Throughout the dialogues, the interlocutors remind each other to interrogate the logic of their arguments, the reasonableness of their conclusions, and what assumptions underlie their claims. Consequently, the Delphic dialogues serve as didactic models for how to engage in hermeneutics, and represent three different yet complementary lessons on how to apply rational, philosophical inquiry to traditional religious practice and ritual.