

Plutarch's so-called Delphic Dialogues engage only intermittently in the traditional discourses about divination and its critique. Plutarch's (and his teacher Ammonius') Platonism focuses rather on the problem of how divine truth can be represented in this world. That problem is discussed with reference to, among others, the Pythia's utterances at the shrine of Delphi: Is it possible that her oracular responses, delivered in unsophisticated prose, originate from a divine source? Plutarch's philosophical solution to this problem postulates a divine inspiration of the Pythia's mind and soul; such a process entails, however, that the utterances themselves, while being indirectly conditioned by the god, are not those of the god.

This theory construes consistency with the Platonic conception of how the immaterial highest god, not quite incidentally called Apollon by Ammonius and Plutarch, communicates with the sublunar world. What seems to have gone largely unnoticed, however, is that there is a tension between that theory's theological implications and traditional religious knowledge (documented both in literary texts and epigraphically) – a religious knowledge which works on the assumption that the oracular utterances at Delphi are indeed those of the god.

This tension entails several issues that have not been sufficiently dealt with. What are the rhetoric devices used in the description of the Delphic sanctuary and its ritual practices in order to either stress or sideline the fact that Plutarch is not writing official "Delphic theology"? How can we understand the apparent tension between his philosophical endeavor and what the offices of priest and prophet demand? What is the relation then between public and intellectual roles in the cultural climate of the early second century AD, and how does that relation influence our understanding of Plutarch as an intellectual writing in the Second Sophistic?