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A UNITY OF VOICES

A DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE

by

Geoffrey Martin Rockwell

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Abstract

A Unity of Voices: A Definition of Philosophical Dialogue

Since the Second World War there has been a dramatic growth in interest in dialogue as an activity and genre of literature. This book sets out to examine both oral philosophical dialogue and the written dialogue so as to define it. Examining Socratic oral practice and the written dialogues of Plato, Cicero, Lucian, Valla, Hume, and Heidegger, this work argues that there is a common mode of persuasion at work in the dialogue, be it oral or written. The dialogue is an orchestrated event that is meant to be overheard. The author is absent, and eavesdroppers or readers are presented with people in a conversation scripted to encourage them to judge between the characters and the philosophical positions they represent.

In order to define dialogue this book looks at Italian Renaissance theories of dialogue, especially that of Sperone Speroni who proposes that dialogue is like comedy where there is a mixture of voices each with its own form and content. The work builds on Speroni's discussion to propose a working definition of dialogue as a *unity of diverse voices*, a definition that is inspired by M. M. Bakhtin. This definition is used to suggest ways of interpreting dialogues and categorizing them. Bakhtin's idea of the chronotope (the space and time of a work or event) is proposed as way of understanding the cultural context of dialogue and how dialogues differ.

The concluding chapter looks at philosophical style and how the dialogue differs from other types of philosophical expression. To understand dialogue we have to understand the limitations and possibilities of the genre. The relationship between the author and auditor of a dialogue is unlike that of other types of philosophical work because of the absence of the author and the prominence of the characters in conversation. The dialogue,

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whatever else it is about, is about the culture of philosophical conversation. It is a genre suited to presenting how people discuss ideas, how positions are related to character, and surveying positions that can be taken on a subject.

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