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Phaedo's Mistake: Socratic Dialogues and Philosophical Authority

The Socratic dialogue was a recognised genre in antiquity, but despite the many recent discussions of his use of this literary form Plato's treatment of other authors of Socratic dialogues has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. In this paper I argue that in his *Phaedo* Plato reflects on one such author and on his own authorial strategy in not publishing arguments in his own name. The historical Phaedo wrote Socratic dialogues, and I show that the references to his lost works indicate that they were preoccupied with the character and physicality of Socrates. In Plato's *Phaedo* Socrates advises Phaedo and his other interlocutors to set aside their personal regard for him and their anxieties about his execution in their analysis of his arguments. And during the course of their conversation arguments are considered in increasing abstraction from the people who put them forward. I propose that here Plato is suggesting that the fixation of Socratic authors such as Phaedo on the person of Socrates rather than on the pursuit of truth he championed constitutes a misunderstanding of the Socratic enterprise. And Socrates' impending execution shows the dangers of Phaedo's mistake. In several passages the interlocutors seem worried that philosophy will die with Socrates, a concern that would be justified if Phaedo were right.

I then argue that my interpretation of the *Phaedo* illuminates Plato's reasons for distancing himself from his published arguments through the dialogue form. My reading of this work corroborates the suggestion made by several scholars that Plato wrote dialogues to avoid writing from a position of authority, for on my reading of the *Phaedo* it is natural to infer that Plato would have wished to avoid claiming for himself the sort of personal authority ascribed to Socrates by Phaedo. But I contend that scholars have not yet adequately explained why Plato thought it necessary to use a literary form to achieve that end, noting that Heraclitus deemed it sufficient simply to advise his reader directly to pay more attention to his account than to himself. I suggest that the *Phaedo* shows why Plato considered the Heraclitean strategy inadequate. In this dialogue Socrates attempts to persuade his companions to devote their attention to the argument rather than to him. But he fails to convince them. I discuss the reasons for Socrates' failure, and suggest that Plato sees Socrates' telling his interlocutors directly to disregard him as problematic, given that they could then try to eschew excessive admiration for Socrates precisely out of their high regard for him. I conclude that it is for this reason that Plato did not merely tell his readers to think less of him than of the truth but chose a literary medium that would allow him to show the necessity of this message without ever saying it directly. It is a message that can only be effective if readers are able to deduce it for themselves.