



Advice on Analysing the Style of Plato's *Phaedo*

Whether you read one or both of the prescriptions from Plato's *Phaedo*, you will see that there is a handful of stylistic tricks he uses especially often to articulate his arguments. Below is a brief guide to some of the most important features, geared towards readers new to Plato.

Particles

Our prescription reports conversations, mostly in direct speech, between Socrates and his friends. Only rarely does the narrator (Phaedo) comment on the manner of delivery. It is through particles, rather, that Plato tells us most about the tone and mood of his speakers. The commentaries explain the force of each particle as it comes up. Readers are urged not to ignore these little but important words, and see them as a key part of the drama.

Readers looking for a more in-depth guide to particles, which make up a big chunk of any Greek author's lexicon, should track down J. D. Denniston's 1934 work *The Greek Particles*, reprinted by Bristol University Press (2013).

Repetition and Variation of Vocabulary

Plato is well aware that his material can be hard to grasp and, as a helping hand, often flags up a key term by repeating it several times within a short space. Generally the term will continue to have importance in the following discussion; so the reader knows to commit any repeated terms to memory. On the other hand, Plato often also varies the terms he uses for a specific thing or concept, using synonyms or near-synonyms to give his reader a better handle on what he means. Both techniques help to make the reader grasp a particularly important detail: in the case of repetition, it is usually a piece of important terminology; with variation, it is usually the idea itself.

Manipulation of Word Order

As an inflected language, Greek offers its authors more freedom in word order than English does. Accordingly, we often see Plato exploiting this freedom to place emphasis on a particular word or phrase. Look out, especially, for instances where a parenthesis - such as the ubiquitous vocative phrase ('O Cebes', 'O Socrates', and so on) - is used to isolate an important phrase from the rest of its sentence.



B L O O M S B U R Y

Use of the Interlocutor

The *Phaedo* may be made up of conversation, but much of it is taken up with Socrates putting forth his theories, with little input from his conversation partners. However, his speeches rarely last long without some appeal to an interlocutor, usually a leading closed question ('Do you not agree?'). Since there is little choice but to agree, these questions and their responses really serve as a means of punctuating an argument and highlighting its main claims.

A Warning on Alliteration

Denniston, the aforementioned expert on particles, held the view that alliteration is rarely a deliberate feature of classical Greek literature (*Greek Prose Style*, 124ff.). Not all scholars are as skeptical, and readers must make up their own minds based on the evidence of their reading. It is perhaps safest, however, when discussing any alliteration you find striking, to speak in terms not of Plato's intent but just of the alliteration's effect on the reader.