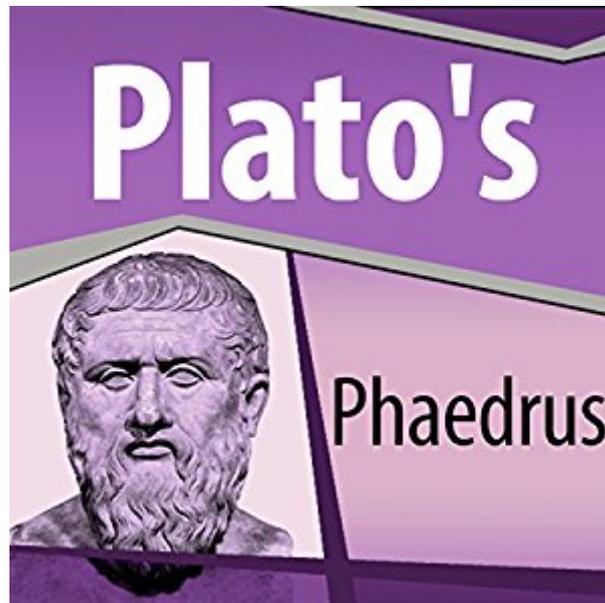


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Plato's Phaedrus



Synopsis

Plato's dialogues frequently treat several topics and show their connections to each other. Phaedrus is a model of that skill because of its seamless progression from examples of speeches about the nature of love to mythical visions of human nature and destiny to the essence of beauty and, finally, to a penetrating discussion of speaking and writing. It ends with an examination of the love of wisdom as a dialectical activity in the human mind. Phaedrus lures Socrates outside the walls of Athens, where he seldom goes, by promising to share a new work by his friend and mentor, Lysias, a famous writer of speeches. This dialogue provides a powerful example of the dialectical writing that Plato uses to manifest ideas that are essential to human existence and to living a good life. Phaedrus shows how oral and written forms of language relate to each other and to philosophy. It simultaneously embodies the entire process in some of the greatest poetry ever written. © Agora Publications

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Customer Reviews

In this review I will compare 3 editions of Plato's Phaedrus:1. Alexander Nehamas & Paul Woodruff (Hackett Pub Co, 1995).2. Stephen Scully (Focus Pub/R.Pullins Co , 2003).3. James Nichols (Cornell University Press, 1998).I have given all 3 editions 5 stars for their own unique perspectives.Throughout the centuries, scholars have debated on what exactly is the central theme of Phaedrus: is it a dialogue about rhetoric? Or is it about Love? Or perhaps it is about both? If so, how are we supposed to understand the connection between Rhetoric and Love? The book itself is divided into 2 parts: the first part is about Love and the second is about Rhetoric, and because of

this division in the book that it generated a lively discussion about Rhetoric versus Love. The 3 editions I review here provided 3 unique perspectives. Nichols argues strongly that Phaedrus is definitely about Rhetoric, in fact he links Phaedrus to Gorgias. His argument is that in Gorgias, Plato discusses Rhetoric in relations to justice, and in Phaedrus, he discusses Rhetoric in relations to Love. Love, therefore is a subordinate subject to Rhetoric. Similarly, Nehamas also argues that Phaedrus is about Rhetoric albeit not as strongly as Nichols. It is a "sustained discussion of Rhetoric" in which Plato used Eros as examples. (xxxviii) Scully's interpretation is slightly different; this is where I find my own position to be closer to. His argument is that Love and Rhetoric are equal parts of Plato's Phaedrus. This unity is possible because "both [love and rhetoric] requires the philosopher at the helm. As a lover, the philosopher guides the soul of the beloved, as a rhetorician, he guides the soul of his partner in conversation." (88) My own position is that: it is about both with a slight emphasis on Love, and not on rhetoric. If Love is defined as that madness and uncontrollable urge to search for the ultimate truth and beauty, then, rhetoric is the tool to achieve that. Rhetoric, for Socrates, is understood as a tool that will guide the soul in search for the beautiful. What he is saying here is: it's all about Love, but you are not getting any Love, if it is without Rhetoric. Overall, I like Scully's edition the best for its completeness: in addition to the translation, it has a wealth of valuable information in the Appendix, including copies of poems by Sappho, Anacreon, Ibycus, etc; plus interpretive text and sample photos of "Phallus Bird". Highly recommended.

This is one of my favorite Platonic dialogues, an analysis of both rhetoric and love which leads to some compelling discussions. However, the translation offered by Penguin Classics is hideously lacking. I can't put my finger on exactly where it goes wrong, but the translator makes it a pain to get through just one page. Everything seems laborious and technical, including the normally exquisite speeches. Get another translation instead. Might I suggest the one published by Hackett? Or perhaps Cornell University Press? Both of those translations take care to make the dialogue as lively and exciting as it rightfully should be.

In Phaedrus, Plato records the conversation of love and rhetoric between Socrates and Phaedrus. Socrates uses love as a metaphor for rhetoric by categorizing the differences between love and lust, as well as the differences between a philosopher who pursues divine truth, and a poet who forgoes truth for ostentations. Then Socrates and Phaedrus eventually conclude the requirements for being a dialectician. In the course of defending proper love and truth, Socrates points out that beauty and truth are divine. Whoever pursues reality would worship beauty and truth with reverence, and his

admiration of divinities yield pleasures. Then in order to receive the blessing from gods, the proper lover and the philosopher must overcome desires with reasoning. Conversely, those commoners who are tempted by earthy imitations of the reality would be trapped by carnal or linguistic pleasures, as the improper lover and the poet, who lack reasoning would drown in the momentary enjoyments of their own wantonness.

_I have heard some call this work a confused jumble of unrelated concepts. These people just didn't get it. There is one unified theme to the Phaedrus: without a deep connection to the soul and to the higher Reality only accessible to the soul, then all human endeavors are in error._The first part of the dialogue deals with three speeches on the topic of love. This is used only as an example and is not the primary theme (though it is an extremely thorough and compelling examination of the subject.) The first speech (by Lysias) is clearly in error- it is badly composed, badly reasoned, and supports what is clearly the wrong conclusion. The second speech (by Socrates), while an impeccable model of correct rhetoric, and reaching the correct conclusion is also essentially flawed- for it makes no appeal to the deepest fundamental causes of things. Simply put, it lacks soul. The third argument (attributed to Stesichorus) however, delves deeply into the soul. In fact, the core of the argument is centered around the proof of the existence and nature of the soul. That is the consistency here- unless you are Philosopher enough to have looked deeply within your own soul, to have made contact (recollection) with ultimate Reality (Justice, Wisdom, Beauty, Temperance, etc.) then your arguments are just empty words- even if you are accidentally on the correct side._The second part of the dialogue concentrates on showing how true rhetoric is more than "empty rhetoric" (i.e. just clever arguments and tricks used to sway the masses.) True rhetoric is shown to literally be the art of influencing the soul through words. It also reads as the perfect description, and damnation, of modern politics and the legal system. No wonder Socrates was condemned to later take poison- he actually BELIEVED in Justice, Truth, and the Good. As a Philosopher he could not compromise on such things for he knew the profound damage and that it would do to his soul and to his "wings."

Best available translation of Plato's Phaedrus in English. They are as literal as possible and convey the subtleties of the Greek text as if it were originally written in English. I also recommend their companion translation of Gorgias.

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