Phaedo of Elis: The Biography, Zopyrus, and His Intellectual Profile

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Although ancient philosophy has shown increasing interest in Plato’s characters, very little has been written about Phaedo of Elis; what exists serves mainly for commentary on the Platonic dialogue which bears his name, not as a substantive re-imagimation of his overall personality. The reasons for this silence or, at best, only passing attention to Phaedo could perhaps be traced back to the exiguous testimonial remains and the dubiety with which even they have been received. For example, Robin himself, pausing over Phaedo’s biography, says that “around the personality of Phaedo we have only uncertainties and darkness” (1970, xi) and Humbert asserts that Phaedo “is for us an enigma” (1967, 277). Only in relatively recent times has there been an awakening of studies that have attempted to define his character with precision, to whom a paragraph of the history of ancient philosophy has even been dedicated.

In this article I propose a delineation of Phaedo of Elis’ intellectual profile based on a critical analysis of the accounts that deal with him. I will take into consideration the most relevant contributions made by both ancient and recent secondary literature, including his complex and not yet sufficiently clarified biography. Additionally, I will specifically examine his most important work, Zopyrus, and, based on the examination of verifiably authentic fragments, I will try to reconstruct the content and highlight the unfortunately few documented philosophical themes that we can attempt to identify.

1 Nails 2002.
2 Wilamowitz’s assertion (1879, 189) is emblematic: “Philosophy should be silent about Phaedo.” Subsequent studies on the history of philosophy have largely followed Wilamowitz’s position. Except in rare occasions, scholars only mention Phaedo’s name without dwelling on his personality.
3 Parmentier 1926, 23, justifiably observes that “all the details of the ancients regarding Phaedo seem dubious and demand a lengthy critical examination.”
1 Biography

According to ancient sources, Phaedo was born in Elis, in the western Peloponnese, from a noble family (τῶν εὐπατριδῶν, DL 2.105). He was later taken prisoner during a war in which his country was defeated, enslaved, sold to an Athenian procurer, and forced to prostitute himself. It was in this capacity that Phaedo came into contact with Socrates, from whom he gained respect and fondness, and was ransomed by one of his disciples. Once free, he converted to philosophy and became one of Socrates’ dearest students. Once Socrates died, Phaedo returned to Elis to found his philosophic school.

Despite this ancient evidence, Monique Dixsaut states that this story seems too attractive to be true (1991, 313). Her doubtfulness, like others’, begins with the testimony of Diogenes Laertius. That testimony seems to be a typical example of his improbable biographies, based largely on stereotyped topics and simple improvisations, perhaps nothing but “a little story at the fringes of the Phaedo.” Even if so, however, the story is realistic enough to explain Phaedo’s presence in Athens in 399 BCE, when he was imprisoned during the war.

The first task the scholarship has taken up is establishing the circumstances in which Phaedo’s capture might have happened. Preller already pointed to two possibilities: either during the Peloponnese war in 431 BCE (Thuc. 2.25), when the territory of Elis was plundered, or during the Eiaic war of 401–400 BCE, led by Sparta and aided by the Athenians military forces. Preller

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5 This goes unmentioned at by Gell. NA 2.18.1–5 (= SSR III A 3).
6 DL 2.105; Gell. NA 2.18; Origen. C. Cels. 1.64; Lib. declam. 1.184.
7 The identity of the disciple who ransomed Phaedo, through the mediation of Socrates, is uncertain: Alcibiades or Crito in DL 2.105; Crito in DL 2.31; Cebes in Gell. NA 2.18.1–5; Alcibiades in Suda s.v. Φαίδων.
8 Robin 1978, x. Boys-Stones 2004, 3, shares the same opinion and admits the possibility that Phaedo’s ancient biographies “were themselves embroidered in the light of his role in the Phaedo,” or even, he adds, “in the light of his own philosophy.”
9 McQueen and Rowe 1989 have shown that Phaedo’s capture during the war is historically possible. See also Dušanić 1993.
10 Xen. Hell. 3.2.21–25 and Diod. Sic. 14.17.4–12. Xenophon links the Iliac war to the Dercyllida expedition, dating it back to 399–398; Diodorus, by contrast, places it in 401. If one trusted Xenophon’s chronology, Elis would have fallen only after the death of Socrates, and so too Phaedo would have been taken prisoner and sold as a slave only after his death; thus they would never have encountered each other. In this case, the Phaedo and its setting would