Socrates as citizen?: the implications of Socratic eros for contemporary models of citizenship

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SOCRATES AS CITIZEN? THE IMPLICATIONS OF SOCRATIC EROS FOR CONTEMPORARY MODELS OF CITIZENSHIP

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Political Science

by

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M.A., Louisiana State University, 2002
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Acknowledgments

All too often acknowledgments fail to acknowledge the true gravity of the debt owed by an author to others. This will be no different. I can do no more than to admit my indebtedness to a great number of family, friends, and colleagues who, each in their own way, contributed to this project. It would be a great injustice on my part, however, if I failed to mention four special individuals without whom none of this would have been possible. From Dr. Cecil Eubanks I always received the warmest compassion and soundest advice, no matter the occasion. From Dr. G. Ellis Sandoz I was gifted with a spiritual and intellectual home at LSU, as well as a shelter from a great many storms. Because of Dr. James Stoner I found my voice, no matter how meek, while learning the greatest of virtues along the way – courage. And in Simone Mhire I found my other half, and learned to love my own all over again. Each of you has my eternal gratitude.
# Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ................................................................. ii

ABSTRACT ................................................................ iv

CHAPTER
1 INTRODUCTION: SOCRATES AS A MODEL FOR CITIZENSHIP? .......... 1

2 THE ARISTOPHANIC SOCRATES ........................................ 28

3 SOCRATES’ APOLOGY ........................................................... 79

4 CREATION IN THE BEAUTIFUL: THE COINCIDENCE OF POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY ......................................................... 132

5 THE LOVE OF THE GOOD AS ONE’S OWN FOREVER: THE POLITICAL NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY ............................................ 186

6 EROS, RHETORIC, AND WRITING ........................................ 237

7 PLATONIC STATESMANSHP – THE LAWS AS MINISTERIAL DRAMA ... 297

8 CONCLUSION ................................................................. 357

BIBLIOGRAPHY ................................................................. 371

VITA ................................................................. 379
Abstract

This dissertation evaluates the appropriateness of using Socrates as a model for contemporary citizenship. I examine the question of Socrates’ civic character by inquiring about the relation of the philosopher (or political scientist) to the city (that is, to political life) without taking for granted that they share a common aim or purpose. Instead, I prepare the discussion with an examination of the treatment of Socrates by the comic poet Aristophanes in the Clouds. I suggest that Socrates’ famed eros, his unwavering love of wisdom, was a problem, one that threatened the very foundations of political society.

By conceiving of Socrates, the first of the political philosophers, as a political problem, I hope to open up a new approach to this most pertinent of political questions. Moreover, I seek an answer to this question by re-evaluating the importance of the lone fact that separates Socrates from his student Plato, who, in contrast to his teacher, left a written collection of his thoughts. It is in the nature of the written dialogue itself that we find the reconciliation between philosophy and politics, or between the good and one’s own. With this reconciliation, we see what is essential to political life and civic virtue, as well as why Socrates cannot be a model for contemporary citizenship.
Chapter 1: Introduction: Socrates as a Model for Citizenship?

Framing the Question of Citizenship

Was Socrates a good citizen? One would certainly hope so, for was it not Plato who remarked of Socrates that he was, “. . . of all those whom we knew in our time the bravest and also the wisest and the most just.”1 There is a certain symmetry between Socrates’ philosophizing and his civic life, one that suggests an essential relationship between thought and action, speech and deed. How could anyone be more civically oriented than he who made the virtue of citizen and city alike his life-long preoccupation? We are inclined to think of Socrates as a hero, as one whose way of life was dedicated to those things most important to human beings, and hence, as a person to whom we may look for guidance and wisdom. And this for good reason, as it is Socrates who is willing to stand by his moral principles in the face of adversity, unshakeable in his resolve when faced with the prospect of death. Few compare favorably with this level of civic and moral integrity, leading to the oft made and not altogether inappropriate

comparison of Socrates and Christ. The question of Socrates’ citizenship is then a simple one, and demands in turn a simple answer: yes.

It might seem odd that a question as simple as this should begin a dissertation, for what is left to say about an immortal icon? Socrates’ status is firmly entrenched in the history of western civilization, and this due in no small part to the efforts of his best students to immortalize his legacy. Maybe it is because of this iconography that scholars continue to inquire about Socrates, if only to reconnect with their own past. Learning something about a philosophical hero teaches us about ourselves as heirs of that heroism. However begrudgingly, philosophers have always felt a debt to Socrates and his heroic philosophizing, a debt that makes Socrates’ life, if not the relationship of his philosophizing to civic life, a perennial issue. Rousseau, one of the first of the philosophers who attempts to reformulate modern civic life with a view to greater depth and virtue, recognizes the legacy if not the usefulness of Socrates in history:

There you have the Wisest of men according to the Judgment of the Gods and the most learned Athenian according to the opinion of all Greece, Socrates, Eulogizing ignorance. Can it be believed that if he were reborn among us, our Learned men and Artists would make him change his mind? No, Gentlemen, this just man would continue to scorn our vain Sciences; he would not help to enlarge that mass of books by which we are flooded from all sides; and, as he did before, he would leave behind to his disciples and our Posterity no other precept than the example and memory of his virtue. Thus is it noble to teach men!3

2Those interested in this comparison will find a great litany of scholarship. One would do well to begin with Paul Gooch’s work Jesus and Socrates (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), and compare it to other works on the same subject, such as those by John Adams Scott, Joseph Priestly, or even Karl Jaspers.

The importance with which Rousseau treats Socrates is indicative of a great many philosophers, if only because one sees in Socrates a purity of purpose the likes of which is unrivaled in western intellectual history. For Rousseau, Socrates is a symbolic reminder of what it means to be committed unequivocally to the life of the mind.

Following in Rousseau’s footsteps is Hegel, who sees in Socrates the birth of subjectivity, and hence, the origins of morality and conscience:

Socrates, at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, first freely expressed the principle of inwardness, of the absolute independence of thought in itself. He taught that man has to discover and recognize in himself what is right and the good, and that this right and good is in its nature universal. Socrates is celebrated as a teacher of morality. The Greeks had ethics, but Socrates undertook to teach them what moral virtues and duties, etc., were. The moral man is not he who merely wills and does that which is right, not the naive man, but he who has the consciousness of what he is doing.

Hegel has great esteem for Socrates, the person in whom human agency becomes self-aware of itself and its own moral depth. And who can forget Nietzsche, who single-handedly wages war on Socrates because of Socrates’ overwhelming influence on western thought:

With Socrates, Greek taste takes a turn in favor of dialectic. What is really happening there? Primarily, a noble taste is thereby defeated; with dialectic, the rabble rises to the top. Before Socrates, dialectical manners were rejected in good society. They were taken to be bad manners, they were a compromising exposure. The youth were warned against them. And all such presentation of one’s reasons was mistrusted. Respectable things, like respectable people, just don’t carry their reasons around on their sleeves like that. Showing your whole hand is improper. Whatever has to get itself proved in advance isn’t worth much. Wherever authority is still considered good form, so that one does not “give reasons” but commands, the dialectician is a

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sort of clown: people laugh at him, they don’t take him seriously. – Socrates was the clown who got people to take him seriously: what really happened there?\textsuperscript{5}

For Nietzsche, Socrates may not have been a hero, but he is symbolic, and symbols have untold power. Socrates represents what went wrong with philosophy, a mistake that has been detrimental to human life.

One need not go quite so high, however, to see that Socrates retains an enduring intellectual attraction. A number of scholars from the last generation recognized their own indebtedness to the Socratic tradition, especially in light of the horrors that plagued the twentieth century, and were led to a rapprochement with their ancient roots. The influential classical scholar Paul Friedlander was among the first to recognize the unique political character of Socrates’ philosophizing when he remarks that:

He (Socrates) ‘discovered the inductive method and definition,’ he ‘founded science’ – in so far as he did – because he searched, through the \textit{Logos}, through continuous dialogical or dialectical inquiry, for the true meaning behind words, for ‘what is,’ for the meaning of ‘justice,’ of the ‘virtues,’ and of the one and only ‘virtue.’ He embarked upon this quest because, since Dike once ruled over the city and state of his forefathers, she might be found again, however hidden. He even died for this ‘justice,’ according to the command of the city; the city, despite its disintegration, for him still bore witness to the supremacy of Dike.\textsuperscript{6}


Following Friedlander’s lead were several noted political philosophers, including Eric Voegelin, who suggests of Socrates that:

He tries to shake up the Athenians individually, and the most conceited among them first, to lead them back to true order. He is the gift of the god to Athens, given as a gadfly to the polis to stir it back into life. Recalling an Heraclitian phrase he admonishes his judges not to be out of temper, like a man suddenly awakened from sleep; they must spare him, for not easily will they find a successor to him to arouse and persuade and reproach them. The man who stands before them accused of asbeía [the crime of impiety] is the true servant of the divine order, sent by the Delphian god to save the impious accusers.⁷

And Hannah Arendt, the thinker most noted for her spirited defense of the political sphere’s integrity, suggests that Socrates inaugurates the attempt to make philosophy useful to the polis:

Friendship to a large extent, indeed, consists of this kind of talking about something that the friends have in common to them. It gains not only its specific articulateness, but develops and expands and finally, in the course of time and life, begins to constitute a little world of its own that is shared in friendship. In other words, politically speaking, Socrates tried to make friends out of Athens’ citizenship, and this indeed was a very understandable purpose in a polis whose life consisted of an intense and uninterrupted contest of all against all, of aei aristuein, ceaselessly showing oneself to be the best of all.⁸

More recently Gregory Vlastos, one of the most celebrated scholars of antiquity in the last century, suggests that contrary to popular belief, both in his time and now, Socrates was a good democrat because his royal art of statesmanship was intent upon making all citizens better through the promulgation of elenctic self-understanding: “. . . there every one of us would have


the royal art, each of us would pursue the ‘examined life,’ we would all the [sic] ruled in our individual lives by our personal knowledge and vision of the good.”

This brief philosophical interlude is in no way comprehensive; it only means to show the enduring ability of the figure of Socrates to kindle philosophical interest. Whether he be friend or foe, philosophers and scholars recognize the importance of Socrates, especially when philosophical integrity and civic life are at stake. That Socrates plays an even greater role in political theory certainly will surprise no one, for how could it be otherwise? If Socrates’ philosophizing and civic virtue form a whole whose character has been so decidedly influential, then surely those whose primary focus is the polity cannot but have an interest in Socrates, if only historically. This is undoubtedly true, yet the question of Socrates’ citizenship has renewed itself recently, becoming the object of a new focus in political theory. Because Socrates’ philosophizing is essentially moral in character, his civic comportment offers something beyond the perennial importance of the philosophical hero. Whether it be in reaction to the perceived moral shortcomings of liberal citizenship, or the moral atrocities perpetuated by the totalitarian regimes of the last century, political philosophers theorizing citizenship have sought to provide a new civic model that offers both depth and distance through moral and intellectual integrity.  


10 As one might expect, the debates concerning citizenship are not new, but their level of intensity has escalated recently. Partly this is the result of so many German emigres who, in fleeing the Nazis prior to the Second World War, relocated to the United States and found homes
Socrates has reappeared on the stage again, with the effect that his way of life becomes a new model of citizenship *par excellence*. It is for this reason that the question of Socratic citizenship is fresh in the minds of political theorists today, and hence, why this dissertation begins by asking the simplest of questions.

**The Elements of Socratic Citizenship**

It is surely a noble effort to confront the dilemmas of modern political life with a view to resolving those dilemmas, and those looking for new models of citizenship are correct in looking to Socrates. Socrates was the first true moral and political philosopher, the first person to raise the question of citizenship simply, and hence, theoretically.11 Socrates’ questions are

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11 As Cicero says, “I am inclined to think Socrates all the wiser for having given up all concerns of this sort and for saying that research into natural philosophy seeks either things greater than human understanding can follow or things that haven nothing at all to do with human existence.” Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and On the Laws*, ed. James Zetzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 8.
inextricably linked with those of civic duty and responsibility, a characteristic that makes his legacy an appropriate starting point for theories on citizenship. Yet there is something more to Socrates, something that points not toward his theoretical disposition, but toward his behavior, his very way of life. Socrates represents more than the first man to engage in political philosophizing; he represents a way of life dedicated to the primacy of theoretical and moral consistency, hence, an example of the serious attempt to make consistent the ambiguities that lie at the heart of citizenship. In his most recent work, Dana Villa uses Socrates as a model for citizenship by pointing out the intimacy between citizenship and political thinking, precisely because of the moral integrity that lies at the heart of both:

This is a book about the relationship between citizenship and philosophy, on the one hand, and citizenship and moral and intellectual integrity, on the other. In it I argue that Socrates was the first to suggest (in the words and deeds reported by Plato) that citizenship must be informed by these two intimately related kinds of integrity, typically seen as the virtues of “good men” or “philosophers” but not citizens. With this suggestion, Socrates created an alternative conception of citizenship, one which placed the traditional civic virtues beneath the related claims of individual moral conscience and intellectual honesty.12

12 Dana Villa, Socratic Citizenship (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. ix. In a slightly different context, Villa has this to say about the salutary effects of Socratic philosophizing: “It is, rather, the persistent attempt to remind ourselves of the finitude of our horizon, the localness of our ‘intuitive ideas and principles,’ the parochial nature of the ‘end of history’ or ideology. As such, political philosophy does not provide the ‘saving power’ of the Socratic ‘stop and think’ – it does not rescue us in ‘emergency situations.’ What it does do is confront the liberal citizen with the question – the Socratic question – of what is the political? With the engagement of this question . . . the gap between the philosopher and the citizen begins to close.” Villa, “The Philosopher versus the Citizen: Arendt, Strauss, and Socrates,” Political Theory, Vol. 26, No. 2 (April, 1998), p. 168.
Villa’s Socrates is the first to demand of civic life that it reflect upon its own moral compass, making sure that what masquerades as traditional morality is not in fact injustice. Thus, according to Villa, “. . . Socrates is the inventor of moral individualism in the West, a thinker who presents a radically new articulation of the relation between individual moral consciousness, political authority, and one’s fellow citizens. By making the avoidance of injustice the moral center of ‘care for one’s soul’ (or self), Socrates transforms both the meaning and the practice of citizenship, pushing it beyond the boundaries of the ‘official’ public realm.”

What sets Socrates apart as a model for citizenship is his integrity, his absolute demand that one be justified in one’s actions with reference to the purgative influence of one’s own moral introspection. According to Villa and those who agree with him, Socrates is the quintessential democratic citizen because he adds depth to the concept of citizenship; he makes it incumbent upon all who participate in the political arena not only to know themselves, but also the genesis and potential outcome of their actions. Socrates represents the best of citizenship because he combines the complex mixture of rights and duties characteristic of citizenship into a single, harmonious whole. He is duty bound to obey the laws and commandments of the city, a duty that goes so far as to demand of him that he lay down his life, a duty with which he complies. But he is also the first to assert his rights, rights the pursuit of which supersede the commands of


\[14\] Cf. Plato’s *Crito*, 44b3 - 54d10.
the law, and thus, possess the primary claim on his obedience.\textsuperscript{15} Socrates’ conscience demands that he be willing to pursue what is just no matter the consequence, and in turn demands of him that he acquiesce in those consequences. He is a perfect model of justice because he does his civic duty while maintaining a distance from civic life; he is, as Villa says, moderately alienated: “Rather, Socrates’ originality is found in his introduction of moral individualism and intellectual sobriety as the critical standards of justice and civic obligation. With this innovation, he invents the possibility of a contentious, moderately alienated citizenship.”\textsuperscript{16}

Villa’s Socratic citizenship represents a promising possibility for citizenship studies by adding a moral dimension to the practice of democratic citizenship, one that has universal applicability in theory while maintaining the substance and historical depth demanded in practice. Duty shines forth from this new model in such a way as to make moral demands on citizenship as opposed to resting contented with citizens who only make demands. Socrates was both a model for all would-be democratic citizens, as well as the best citizen in Athens, his democracy. This model is an important starting point today, for it makes possible appropriating the learning and insights of past thinkers while allowing such research to become meaningful to the issues of

\textsuperscript{15}Cf. Plato’s \textit{Apology of Socrates}, 29c2 - 29e3.

\textsuperscript{16}Villa, \textit{Socratic Citizenship}, p. 2. Villa reconciles this as best he can by calling Socrates a “constitutional patriot,” one devoted not so much to his people, but to the regime that makes his way of life possible. Cf. pp. 48-50. Note too that Villa gives credit to George Kateb as the first to use the phrase “moderately alienated.” (\textit{Socratic Citizenship}, p. 311n3).
the present. Those who, like Villa, see in Socrates an alternative to the dilemmas of modern civic life usher in a new era for political theory.

This interest in Socrates suggests that there may indeed be wisdom remaining in ancient texts, if only to the extent to which an ancient, somewhat alien perspective might provide a vantage point from which we can better understand ourselves. Classical scholarship can be brought to bear on contemporary problems in a new and useful way, a possibility that recommends itself not only to political theory as a discipline, but also to the issues that attend to questions of citizenship more generally. George Kateb, whose civic theory is similar to Villa’s, also has recourse to Socrates as an example of what citizenship should be:

We can distill his (Socrates’) claim in this way: in devoting himself as an episodically active citizen, as a general nonparticipant in politics, and as ‘a sort of gadfly’ to the cause of diminishing injustice and not lending himself as an instrument to its perpetration, he has labored to prevent people, at home and abroad, from being deprived of what is theirs. He has also risked much that is rightfully his in doing so, even though being deprived of what is rightfully his – especially life – does not matter too much to him. That kind of deprivation matters a great deal more to others. A really good person does not attach himself very tightly to even the rudiments of his existence or to his existence itself; a really good person also knows that often those he wants to protect are (or have been or will be) themselves initiators or instruments of evil.17

For reasons such as these Michael Walzer also finds in Socrates an ancient example of the social critic duly concerned with the well-being of his fellow citizens: “Socrates’ mission is to question, examine, test, and reprove the people he encounters in the streets of Athens – and to teach them to pursue goodness not only for their own sakes but also for the sake to the city.”18

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Alexander Nehamas, who, in his attempt at “opening a space for a way of doing philosophy that constitutes an alternative, though not necessarily a competitor, to the manner in which philosophy is generally practiced in our time,” sees in Socrates one who, “makes the articulation of a mode of life their central topic: it is by reflecting on the problems of constructing a philosophical life that they construct the life their work constitutes.”

The work of these contemporary political theorists is a delightful reminder of the use to which old books can be put today. Their scholarship also points toward something more important – Socrates himself might serve as a useful guide for modern behavior through the way in which he gave voice to moral detachment, to what in modern language is called conscience, while nevertheless fulfilling his obligations to the city. Socratic citizenship is both form and substance; all may participate in theory, but participation in practice requires serious attention to moral and civic considerations. The simple answer to the political theorist’s question of Socrates’ citizenship, then, must be an unequivocal yes, if only because the coincidence of his moral and intellectual integrity provides a perfect model for democratic citizenship, ancient or modern.

Given all of this, one might suspect that a dissertation seeking to enter this fray would have little to contribute. What more could be offered to complete our model of Socratic


citizenship? In a sense, what will follow will not seek to add to this model, at least not directly. Instead, this study will evaluate the uses to which Socrates’ philosophizing and way of life have been put, and that by reassessing the accuracy and plausibility of the methods used to reconstruct “Socratic citizenship.” Socrates may in fact offer a great deal of insight into the quandaries associated with modern civic life, but we stand only at the beginning of possessing such insight, despite what some would have us believe. That philosophers and political theorists have had an insatiable interest in Socrates is understandable; that this interest has led not a few to appropriate his speeches and deeds in ways that are of questionable authenticity is regrettable.

The purpose of this study is to re-frame the terms and context of the debate, and in so doing, provide the correct conceptual frame from which one must approach the subject of Socrates, if not citizenship simply. Specifically, we will seek to evaluate the accuracy of Socrates’ civic portrayal, and hence, the appropriateness and generalizability of the claims made on his behalf. Those who have sought to use Socrates as a model have proceeded from a more or less formal or legal understanding of democratic citizenship, seeking to add depth by showing an ethical dimension to Socrates’ civic life. Thus they begin with what is essentially a democratic

21That is to say, those who look back to Socrates as an answer to the present do not always do so with sound method. Socrates is no answer for us today, but in one way or another he might provide insight into who we are as heirs to his legacy. Thus, we must begin with him to understand why and how we are presented with the problems facing us, not return to him as an alternative to what plagues us. By choosing the latter instead of the former, our conceptual framework is always skewed in favor of our own prejudices, and hence, we are likely to see in Socrates what we most wish to see in ourselves.
understanding of citizenship, which is to say, they begin with what is most urgent for them and look outward for inspiration. Unfortunately, this understandable aspiration lends itself to a certain parochialism that refuses to notice the extent to which what is found is the product of what is sought.

In contrast, this study will begin instead from a substantive conception of citizenship, seeking in what ways Socratic philosophizing formally alters what is in existence prior to philosophy. In more pragmatic terms, we will begin the discussion of citizenship not from the perspective of rights, but instead of duty. To do this will require an approach not previously taken. It will require what few wish to do – to roll up our proverbial sleeves and engage in the laborious task of philosophical history. What we seek is the historical Socrates – the man who gave rise not only to moral and political philosophy, but also to the eternal symbol now immortalized in the works of Plato and Xenophon. We must engage in this task if we are to take the subject of Socratic citizenship seriously, for even if we mean only to utilize the teachings of the Platonic Socrates, those teachings remain inaccessible to us without the proper framework.  

Only by understanding the historical Socrates can we understand what is meant by Socratic

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22Take for instance the stance of David Corey, who follows Dana Villa’s lead to Socratic Citizenship; “the point of this study is not to contribute to the debate about the ‘historical Socrates,’ but to take issue with the way certain scholars have interpreted key texts in the Socratic literary tradition, and to think about the implications of their misinterpretation for theorizing citizenship.” “Socratic Citizenship: Delphic Oracle and Divine Sign,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 2, (Spring, 2005), p. 203. The problems with this approach are apparent, for how can one know the legitimacy of an interpretation without knowing the subject being interpreted?
citizenship, be that in an actual, a philosophical, or a dramatic sense.\textsuperscript{23} For whatever else can be said of the historical Socrates, this much is certain: He was a citizen of Athens.

In a way, this study will attempt to bridge the gap between political science and various other disciplines that have taken the task of reconstructing the historical Socrates seriously. It was Vlastos who, not more than fifty years ago, reinvigorated the scholarship on the historical Socrates by suggesting that such scholarship was even possible.\textsuperscript{24} Yet this study does not seek a synthesis; the point of this inquiry is not simply to bring the insights of one discipline to bear on another. Quite the opposite, the intersection of divergent fields yields new pathways to thinking with the result that the present study seeks to offer a new approach to the question of the historical Socrates by re-conceptualizing the adequateness of his civic character. Let us then address for a moment the means by which this new conceptualization will be pursued so as to evaluate the potential, as well as the shortcomings, of what will follow.

\textsuperscript{23}By actual here Socrates’ historical civic life is meant; by philosophical the historical intersection of his philosophizing with the city at large is meant; by dramatic the presentation of the previous two is meant.

\textsuperscript{24}Vlastos speaks of the “strangeness” that characterizes Socrates, a subject without which one simply could not understand Socrates, but because of which the question of the historical Socrates had to be taken seriously: “The question ‘Who are you talking about – Socrates \textit{or} a ‘Socrates’ in Plato?’ will dog your steps, barking at you, forcing you to turn and face it in self-defense. If you mean the former, you must argue for it. You must give reasons for the claim that through a ‘Socrates’ in Plato we can come to know the Socrates of history – the Socrates who made history, taught Plato and others, changed their thinking and their lives, and through them changed the course of Western thought.” Vlastos, \textit{Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 45.
The Inadequacies of Previous Approaches

This study’s approach, its methodology if you will, has already been adumbrated, but let us nevertheless say a bit more about the details. The contemporary scholarship that deals with Socrates errs in one small yet absolutely critical way: it fails to take seriously the historical person of Socrates.\(^\text{25}\) Not Plato’s Socrates, Xenophon’s Socrates, or even Aristotle’s Socrates is what we seek; Socrates himself is the focus of our inquiry, an inquiry that cannot help but be historical and philosophical at the same time. Without due attention to the problem of the historical Socrates, one is left without an interpretive ballast, something with which to secure a systematic inquiry and against which that study might be made honest. Without the proper moorings any study can be cast astray in the storm of disputation and overcome by the waves of parochialism.

\(^{25}\)This is not to say, of course, that scholars have failed to make an effort. Quite the opposite, many have made Socrates’ historicity the object of their inquiry. But for reasons that have already been made clear, and for some that will follow, all of this research suffers from serious methodological shortcomings. Those interested in the existing scholarship would do well to consult the works already referenced, as well as Alban Winspear and Tom Silverber, *Who Was Socrates* (Rahway, New Jersey: Quinn & Boden Company, 1939); E. Zeller, *Socrates and the Socratic Schools* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885); Anton-Herman Chroust, *Socrates: Man and Myth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957); A. E. Taylor, *Socrates: The Man and His Thoughts* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953); and Luis E. Navia, *The Socratic Presence: A Study of the Sources* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993).
Yet Socrates did not write, and this is no small matter. Many scholars have dealt with this issue, offering a variety of explanations as to why Socrates was unable, or felt it unnecessary to write. Paul Friedlander, one of the better known and most widely respected Platonic Scholars of the last century, attributes Socrates’ silence to the preeminent status of *logos* during the early part of the fifth century: “after the Greeks discovered what we know as philosophy and realized that the *Logos* was the key to the nature of things, this *Logos* acquired an almost overpowering status.” (Paul Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction*, Vol. 1, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 108). Also on this theme, A. E. Taylor suggests that the avenues opened up by the written word were simply not available to Socrates when he says, “. . . the Athenians of those spacious days did not write books; it was an age of great tragedies, but not of prose literature.” (A. E. Taylor, *Socrates: The Man and His Thoughts* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), p. 12). Bridging both perspectives nicely is Luis Navia, who writes, “the fact that for him the word is always something spoken and heard, not written and seen, has been viewed as a necessary consequence of his philosophical position, for if he claimed to know only that he knew little or nothing, how could he have chosen to express himself in a form which admits of no subsequent alterations.” (Luis E. Navia, *The Socratic Presence: A Study of the Sources* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. 2).

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26 Many scholars have dealt with this issue, offering a variety of explanations as to why Socrates was unable, or felt it unnecessary to write. Paul Friedlander, one of the better known and most widely respected Platonic Scholars of the last century, attributes Socrates’ silence to the preeminent status of *logos* during the early part of the fifth century: “after the Greeks discovered what we know as philosophy and realized that the *Logos* was the key to the nature of things, this *Logos* acquired an almost overpowering status.” (Paul Friedlander, *Plato: An Introduction*, Vol. 1, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 108). Also on this theme, A. E. Taylor suggests that the avenues opened up by the written word were simply not available to Socrates when he says, “. . . the Athenians of those spacious days did not write books; it was an age of great tragedies, but not of prose literature.” (A. E. Taylor, *Socrates: The Man and His Thoughts* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), p. 12). Bridging both perspectives nicely is Luis Navia, who writes, “the fact that for him the word is always something spoken and heard, not written and seen, has been viewed as a necessary consequence of his philosophical position, for if he claimed to know only that he knew little or nothing, how could he have chosen to express himself in a form which admits of no subsequent alterations.” (Luis E. Navia, *The Socratic Presence: A Study of the Sources* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. 2).

possibilities, beginning with their philosophical premises, is helpful and worthy of quoting at length:

Depending on whether one’s main interest was Socrates or Plato, the issue was known as ‘the problem of Socrates’ or ‘the Platonic question.’ According to a thesis of John Burnett, first published in 1911 and supported by A. J. P. Taylor in 1926, everything uttered by ‘Socrates’ in Plato’s dialogues actually represented the beliefs of the historical Socrates. On the other side was Paul Shorey, who argued that everything spoken by the character of Socrates in Plato’s dialogues actually represented the philosophical beliefs of Plato. Shorey connected his view of the Platonic question to an argument about the philosophical unity of Plato’s dialogues. Between these views are two others. One, a somewhat Aristotelian view, has been taken by Ernest Barker, Werner Jaeger, and to some extent W. K. C. Guthrie, who have found kernels of the beliefs of the historical Socrates in Plato’s ‘early’ dialogues, which Plato then developed into new philosophical and political theories that become clear in his ‘middle’ and ‘later’ dialogues. The later, more clearly Platonic views, relate to the views of the historical Socrates as ‘actuality’ to ‘potentiality.’ More recently, Gregory Vlastos rejected this Aristotelian perspective by developing rigorous analytical criteria for differentiating the view of the historical Socrates and those of the historical Plato, associating the views of the historical Socrates with those of the dialogic Socrates of Plato’s so-called early dialogues, and refusing to see Plato’s ‘mature’ views as natural or inevitable developments of the views of the historical and early dialogical Socrates.28

Depending on the tactic one takes, the Socrates of history can be made clear in contradistinction to Plato or to the later Platonic Socrates. One need only determine which premise accords best with the “spirit” of Socrates to know where one should begin to search.

But herein lies the problem. How does one know what premise to accept if one knows nothing about the spirit of Socrates? How does one choose between premises that assume about the subject what is itself in question? Moreover, how is one to parse “early” dialogues from middle or even late dialogues when the subject of the dialogue is itself in dispute?29 The problem is


On this point, hear C. J. Rowe: “Most contemporary interpreters of Plato begin by assuming that his thought developed over his lifetime, which is in itself, perhaps, an innocuous assumption. But they then go on to take it for granted that this development or evolution is one
of Socrates is no antiquarian interest; without a conception of the man himself, one is likely to miss nuances that might show, in whatever minor ways, how literary versions are consciously diverging from the historical personage. This is not to say that within Plato’s work one might not find situations where the historical person is represented with some accuracy, and others where the historical person gives way to the author’s own opinions. Indeed, this study will make the claim that the dialogues do provide internal evidence of such occurrences. It is to say, however, that just as it was with the question of citizenship, the Socrates of history can only emerge when one starts from him instead of looking back to him.

A New Approach in Old Clothing

Where then does one start if all previous approaches have led to inconsistency or ambiguity? How does one avoid, if we use the language of modern social science, generating an interpretation that is the artifact of our instrument? Let us begin by restating the obvious: there is no return possible to the historical Socrates; his literary silence bars anyone from direct access of the main factors, perhaps even the most important factor, behind the apparent differences between the ideas he presents in the course of the dialogues. Thus it is normal to begin any introduction to Plato by dividing up his dialogues in ‘early’, ‘middle’ and ‘late’, and characterizing the thought of these three ‘periods’ in certain standard ways: so ‘early’ roughly equals ‘Socratic’, ‘middle’ is ‘constructive’ or ‘optimistic’ (or, alternatively, the period when Plato went too far), while ‘late’ is ‘critical’, or ‘pessimistic’, or again, when he abandoned the platonist excesses of the middle period and started doing real philosophy. Features in individual dialogues from each group are then explained according to this pattern . . . My proposal is simply that this kind of explanation should be used as a last resort, because it rests on assumptions about his state of mind, and his biography in general, to which we have either no independent access, or very little access.” C. J. Rowe, “Killing Socrates: Plato’s Later Thoughts on Democracy,” The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. 121 (2001), p. 64.
to his true thoughts. But does this mean our method, however novel it might pretend to be, is
doomed to failure as well? Not necessarily. There may yet be an alternative that can provide an
accurate depiction of Socrates the citizen while maintaining a view unadulterated by
philosophical or literary perspective. We will try something different, a novel twist on things
that uses a negative as a positive fact of interpretation, and hence, as a starting point of reference.
Put more succinctly, that Socrates did not write shall not be a hindrance to our study; quite the
opposite, this study shall use it as the empirical basis from which it will construe its interpretive
framework. Thus, our research question will be this: of what significance to his status as citizen
is Socrates’ refusal or inability to write. Conversely, our attended hypothesis will be: Socrates’
literary silence is of great significance in that it demonstrates his utter indifference to the common
bonds of civic attachment. As odd as such a question and answer may sound, it is in fact the
necessary starting point if one wishes to get some sense of the historical person, especially as he
compares to the literary presentation so well known. Socrates’ refusal or reluctance to write
should be related, especially if Villa’s claim that Socrates’ citizenship and philosophy went hand-
in-hand is true, such that if we can determine why he did not write, we will be in a position to
understand his historical citizenship. This is the task laid before us.

We still do not possess, however, a sufficient starting point for our examination. If we
are to escape the interpretive trap into which so many have fallen previously, we need a new
textual source from which we might better evaluate our empirical starting point. We have one,
and only one, that will suffice, precisely because our needs demand that we begin not with a student or follower of Socrates, but with a contemporary with whom Socrates would have reckoned. Of all Socrates’ contemporaries, philosophic or otherwise, there was one who made the historical Socrates the focus of at least one of his works. The comic poet Aristophanes, in whose play the *Clouds* Socrates is mocked, provides an opportunity for those seeking to construct an accurate picture of the real man:

In fact, the Aristophanic view finds its advocates to a considerable degree in Xenophon, not to mention Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, and ancient anecdotology. No matter how biased our playwright was in his social sermon, it is unlikely that he distorted the real Socrates more than he had done the real Cleon or the real Euripides; and we know well (from Thucydides’ description of the former as well as from the tragedies of the latter) that whatever Aristophanes wrote about them remains within the bounds of probability.\(^{30}\)

Aristophanes’ portrayal of Socrates is openly a caricature, but a caricature can, if understood properly, provide access to that which is being caricatured; “Aristophanes’ presentation is not a piece of buffoonery; it goes to the root of the matter, not in spite but because of the fact that it is a comedy.”\(^{31}\) To caricature something is to make it appear ridiculous, i.e., to make it appear absurd in light of common opinion. To be effective, to be able to make someone appear absurd, however, there must be something about the person being caricatured that lends itself to comedy; “just as literally speaking there can be no complete falsehood, given the primacy of truth, there

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cannot be a ridiculous speech of some length which does not include serious passages given the
primacy of the serious. Within these limitations Aristophanes succeeds perfectly in integrating
the serious or the just into the ridiculous.”

Aristophanes’ *Clouds* could be a successful comedy, if by successful we mean publicly performed and generally recognizable, only if the caricature of Socrates resembled the historical person closely enough to make its ridiculousness intelligible.

Aristophanes’ *Clouds* provides us with the perfect source material for our research question. Historically, it is the first account of Socrates given by someone who would have known him, not as a teacher or mentor, but as a fellow citizen. Theoretically, it does not suffer from philosophical predispositions because it is aimed at the man rather than his ideas. If we

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32 Ibid., p. 110. Consider also these comments by A. E. Taylor: “We have in the first place to remember that the Old Attic Comedy dealt throughout in personal burlesque, not in satire on generalized social “types,” and that it was essential to the comedian’s success that the object of the burlesque should be a public notoriety. We may therefore be perfectly certain that Socrates was already a well-known figure when Aristophanes attacked him, and that the poet counted upon the excellence of the caricature as something which the audience would recognize.” (Taylor, *Socrates: The Man and His Thoughts*, p. 20).

33 A. E. Taylor asserts the usefulness of Aristophanes’ caricature too when he says the following: “For if the *Clouds* is really a genuine caricature, by the hand of a master in the art, of the hero of the *Phaedo*, we ought to be able to trace in it, with due allowance for the distortion which it is the business of the caricaturist to effect, the very lineaments which we see glorified by the approach of martyrdom in the *Phaedo*. If we can do so, all serious doubt as to the historical character of Plato’s account of his master’s pursuits and mental history should be dispelled, and for this reason the play of Aristophanes, if it can be trusted at all, is one of the most precious of all documents for the study of the development of Greek philosophical thought.” A. E. Taylor, *Varia Socratica* (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1911), p.129.
were concerned about starting with Socrates instead of reaching back to him, surely we can do no
better. And as a matter of practice, we can be reasonably sure that because the *Clouds* is a
comedy, it will take aim at what is most distinctive about Socrates, albeit through the veil of
laughter. Aristophanes was no political philosopher – although he may well have had profound
political insight – and as such cannot be accused of the same parochialism that plagues all
historical studies with a philosophical purpose. We have found in the *Clouds*, then, the perfect
textual starting point from which we can begin to evaluate Socrates’ civic life based on our one
empirical certainty – that he did not write.

**Selection of Texts**

A few words need be said about the aggregate body of texts to be used in this study. To
provide this study with a proper foundation required that we begin with a non-philosophical
text. But this study will not be about Aristophanes and Socrates simply, for if we remained at
the level of comedy, we would fall into the same traps that limit other approaches. If we focused
singularly on the *Clouds*, our own study would have no ballast to secure our interpretation
against the flippancy of comedy. In a word, we would have no balance to the comic presentation
of Socrates. By beginning with Aristophanes, however, we can have recourse to other texts
traditionally used to reconstruct the life and times of Socrates, if only because such recourse will
be pursued with a comical sobriety unknown to most research. Thus the bulk of the texts to be
used will be Platonic dialogues, yet they will take on a new and decidedly different character.
But what is to prevent our own selection bias – selecting texts so as to confirm an existing hypothesis rather than with a view to the truth of the matter? This is an important problem whose significance cannot be overstated. Rather than using a random selection of texts, the technique most often used to prevent selection bias, we will have recourse to the inner logic of texts, choosing those dialogues addressed to the research question and whose themes correspondence directly with one another. Thus, after having sketched in detail Aristophanes’ portrayal of Socrates, the study will move to Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*. The *Apology* is the logical counterpart to the *Clouds* because it is in the *Apology* that Socrates refers to the “old accusers” of which Aristophanes is one. The literary correspondence between the two texts is clear, which makes the selection of the *Apology* an obvious choice.

A close reading of the *Apology* reveals that it is in fact a direct response to the *Clouds*, especially to what we have already referred to as “the problem of Socrates.” From this reading we see that the *Apology*’s answers to the criticisms leveled by the *Clouds* at the historical Socrates recognize if not legitimize those criticisms. In beginning with Aristophanes, our portrait of Socrates changes dramatically; no longer is the *Apology* simply an indictment of Athens. And to the degree to which Plato seemingly agrees with Aristophanes over Socrates’ historical personality, we see that the model of citizenship for which Socrates was supposed to be an exemplary example is at best a dubious claim.
To say that Socrates was a dubious example of citizenship requires an argument in detail and with depth. Or, put another way, our study needs more evidence before we may pass judgement on the historical Socrates’ civic life. From the *Apology* we move then to the *Symposium*, the only dialogue in which both Aristophanes and Socrates are present, and not coincidentally, where the theme of the discussion is love. What one loves, as well as why it is loved, is an important question for citizenship because it gives a testimony to one’s true loyalty. It is fitting that our study take up the theme of love, or more properly eros, because that theme is central in defining the pre-philosophical sense of citizenship to which we alluded earlier. Only by knowing what citizens mean when they speak about loving their country, about honor, or about duty can we truly appreciate how Socrates’ love of wisdom relates to civic life.

From the *Symposium* we move to the *Phaedrus*, and this for three reasons. First, the *Symposium* is about eros, a theme shared with the *Phaedrus*, and thus a common bond between two dialogues that should be better elucidated by comparing two dialogues on the same subject. Second, the *Symposium* had Aristophanes and Socrates as dramatic characters, but it also had Phaedrus, the other character present in the *Phaedrus* along with Socrates and after whom the dialogue is named. The internal dynamics link the *Phaedrus* together with the *Symposium* in much the same way as the *Clouds* and the *Apology*, and for that reason one cannot help but to develop the theme of eros in the *Symposium* with reference to the *Phaedrus*. Thirdly, and possibly most important, the *Phaedrus* is the dialogue in which Socrates presents his famous
critique of writing, a critique we must take into account if we are to understand our empirical starting point, as well as evaluate our textual approach. And given that the critique of writing is leveled in the context of political writing and rhetoric, we cannot help but to include the *Phaedrus* as a part of our study into the character of Socrates’ historical citizenship.

The last text included in this study may strike one as odd given the tenor of the discussion thus far. We move to the *Laws* as the last text to be evaluated, a text made altogether conspicuous by its most striking characteristic: Socrates as a character is wholly absent. How are we to derive any information about Socrates’ civic character if he is not present as an object of inquiry? The answer to this is complex, yet nevertheless essential. There is a certain selection logic to including the *Laws* in our study – the only empirical fact we know of Socrates is that he did not write; the only empirical characteristic separating this specific text whose explicit character is civic from the other Platonic dialogue is the complete absence of Socrates. There is something important about Socrates’ absence from the *Laws*, important because Socrates’ critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*, especially political writing, suggests that whatever is present in the *Laws* is somehow characteristically un-Socratic. To this extent, an evaluation of the *Laws* from the perspective of Socrates’ idiosyncracies discerned from the other texts should yield convincing evidence for what was not part of the historical Socrates’ characteristic citizenship.

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34But what of the *Republic*? Is it not the dialogue from which one might best discern Socrates’ civic character? This is undoubtedly true, but for reasons that will become clear in the course of this study, the selection of the *Laws* will say a good deal more about Socrates’ civic character because of his absence than the *Republic* does with his inclusion.
And in so far as this comparison of negatives – Socrates’ literary silence with his absence from the *Laws* – provides insight into the true nature of Socrates’ civic character, our study will be in a better position to evaluate those who utilize him as a model for citizenship, if not also contribute indirectly to the conceptual debates about citizenship simply. At least part of this contribution will be in the separation of what one can call Socratic citizenship from what one should call Platonic citizenship.

Let us begin now where we must – from the earliest extant text whose subject is Socrates. In doing so, we return to the origins of not only political thinking, but of theoretical thinking simply. We return then to the contextual origins of citizenship that are pre-philosophic; our path begins from the locus of human existence. Socrates will come to sight neither as a philosophical figure nor as a comic one if we do not begin first from the perspective of the simple citizen, or put another way, of the citizen simply. Thus our study begins from the city simply, and hence from the only horizons out of which philosophy could first appear, and first appear ridiculous.
Chapter 2: The Aristophanic Socrates

Spectators, to you I will freely speak out the truth, by Dionysus who nurtured me. As I would win and be believed wise, so also, since I hold you to be shrewd spectators and this to be the wisest of my comedies, I deemed it worthy that you first should taste afresh the one that provided me the most work. At that time I retreated, worsted by vulgar men, although I didn’t deserve it. For this, then, I blame you, the wise, for whose sake I busied myself over it. But I will never voluntarily betray the shrewd among you.

*Clouds*, 517 – 528

Understanding the historical Socrates – what he thought, how he acted, and what sort of life he lived – requires a fresh start, one that can shed new light on an old problem. We have said a good deal about why the work of Aristophanes is a good starting point for our study, but too little about its literary nature, i.e., about comedy. At first glance, the *Clouds* presents itself as an odd choice for those seeking this fresh start. As a comedy, a work of art that takes humor and mockery as its means of presentation. The *Clouds* is not, strictly speaking, serious. It seeks to please its audience, to invoke delight in those who would share in its buffoonery. Comedy is about humor; it seeks to make men laugh at others if not at themselves, and in so doing, transforms the commonplace or serious into levity. Comedy, then, is about laughter, and the *Clouds* seeks first to make us laugh at that upon which it focuses.

It would be a mistake, though, to think of comedy as sheer tomfoolery. If it were, looking to the *Clouds* to find a sober image of Socrates would itself be comic, for in every exercise of futility there is an element of the ridiculous. Quite the opposite, what is funny in comedy often
emerges from a very complex relationship of exigency and frivolity, giving us hope that we may glean an image of the serious from within the humorous.\(^1\) Leo Strauss’ insightful description of comedy’s intricacies reminds us of how that which makes us laugh can also instruct us as to the seriousness of what is being laughed at:

The Aristophanean comedy, while abounding with what is by nature ridiculous on the lowest level, always transcends this kind of the ridiculous; it never remains mere buffoonery. That which is by nature not ridiculous is not omitted; it comes to sight within the comedy. The Aristophanean comedy owes its depth and its worth to the presence within it of the solemn and the serious.\(^2\)

To use the *Clouds* as an access point to the historical Socrates is thus complicated, if only because so much ridiculousness separates fact from fiction. A great deal of effort and an element of imagination will be required, for finding the true Socrates means finding the fire where there is so much smoke. Such a task is difficult but not impossible; it demands of us only that we be prepared to take comedy for what it is before we assume of it what it is not.

\(^1\)Kierkegaard too recognizes the usefulness of Aristophanes’ comedy when he tells us that, “Aristophanes’ view of Socrates will provide just the necessary contrast to Plato’s and precisely by means of this contrast will open the possibility of a new approach for our evaluation. Indeed, it would be a great lack if we did not have the Aristophanic appraisal of Socrates; for just as every process usually ends with a parodying of itself, and such a parody is an assurance that this process has outlived its day, so the comic view is an element, in many ways a perpetually corrective element, in making a personality or an enterprise completely intelligible. Therefore, even though we lack direct evidence about Socrates, even though we lack an altogether reliable view of him, we do have in recompense all the various nuances of misunderstanding, and in my opinion this is our best asset with a personality such as Socrates.” Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 128.

For comedy to be comic, there must be something to mock, something that makes the ridiculousness of its presentation meaningful. This is the complexity of comedy, the necessary preconditions without which its foolishness would not be funny. Comedy requires or presupposes something serious, if not solemn, as a condition of its existence. Only by taking something that is well known, be it a person or situation, and casting it in a ridiculous light can comedy create a setting through which higher, more serious things are viewed from a lower, less solemn perspective. By keeping in mind the relationship between what is funny and what is serious, the *Clouds* should provide us with access to the historical Socrates, even if it is through the vantage point of laughter.

**The City in the Clouds**

The *Clouds* is a work whose focus is the effect Socrates has on several of his fellow Athenians, but it shows this effect by mocking more than Socrates alone. Aristophanes’ brilliance lies in his ability to show the comical relationship that exists between Socrates and his fellow citizens, and thus, to mock both philosopher and city alike. His caricature of Socrates develops its full significance only within a larger, more comprehensive framework. Socrates and Athens affect one another, and any attempt to understand one apart from the other will lead us into a misleading abstraction. It is in and through his sketch that Aristophanes gives us a comic glimpse of something very important for our current purposes; for reasons yet to be explained,
the historical Socrates was at odds with Athens, and this tension was serious enough to Aristophanes to warrant a burlesque.

The plot of the *Clouds* can be summarized as follows: the poor farmer Strepsiades is burdened by obligations and limitations foisted upon him both by nature and convention. This simple rustic is driven to the brink of bankruptcy because of debts that have come due but which he can not repay. He has incurred these debts, which now threaten to take all of his property and sustenance, because of his son Pheidippides’ love of horses and horsemanship. Nature rewarded Strepsiades with a child whose tastes exceed his father’s means, a reward that led the doting father to incur exorbitant debt to satisfy those tastes. Now, on the verge of the debts coming due, Strepsiades must face the prospect of certain economic ruin, a situation sure to estrange him from his simple way of life.

Strepsiades’ situation, as might be expected, is not purely the result of nature’s cruel irony. The father informs the audience that his beloved son has taken too much after his mother.³ Strepsiades’ marriage was an ill-arranged union of opposites, one that wedded a poor but proud farmer with a cosmopolitan patrician. The offspring that resulted from this arrangement, Pheidippides, took to the speeches of his mother at an early age, speeches that exhorted him to follow in the footsteps of her aristocratic lineage. Pheidippides wishes to live the life of a wealthy patrician gentleman, and his love of horses is but one example of his genteel disposition.

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The conventional opinions of what is best according to his mother’s noble stock prevail upon the young man; Strepsiades’ simple life is defenseless against this onslaught by nature and convention. His love for his son has led to his impending downfall, and against this backdrop of desperation, Strepsiades first considers the usefulness of Socrates.

Let us begin with what is most obvious. The irony of the *Clouds* is that it does not seem, at least in the beginning, to be about Socrates at all. Instead, it centers around a particular family faced with problems that can arise in the course of everyday life. The opening of the *Clouds* is important, for if the focus is Socrates’ influence on Athens, it develops this focus by beginning from the perspective of the family. This particular family, because of its own circumstances and decisions, has run afoul of the city and its laws. That which typically protects families in their daily interactions, namely the laws, has become a burden to Strepsiades because of his own lack of prudence in dealing with his personal affairs. Because of this, Strepsiades considers transgressing the city and its laws instead of putting his own affairs in order, a decision that clearly shows his preference for his family over his city. The decision means only one thing to him: he must seek out Socrates.

Socrates is not to be found in the marketplace or the agora cross-examining friends and foes alike. Instead he is in his own private enclave, minding his business and pursuing his unique interests. He is uninterested in the goings-on of everyday life, preferring to keep to himself, his thoughts, and his students rather than to mix with his fellow citizens. Socrates’ isolation is
important to the plot of the *Clouds* because it is related to a broader conflict between private attachments to the family and public obligations to the city. For now, it is safe to say that our quest for Socrates begins with the tension between the family and the city, a tension that highlights both the importance and incommensurability of private attachments and public duties.¹ Let us take a moment to sketch in more detail the fullness of this introduction to Socrates.

Strepsiades’ initial plan of action is to send Pheidippides to Socrates so that the young man might learn the art of clever speech so as to outsmart the creditors. This plan shows that Socrates and his followers have a reputation in Athens as being in possession of a certain sort of wisdom. Strepsiades makes this clear when he describes Socrates’ think tank to Pheidippides by saying, “that is the thinkery of wise souls. In there dwell men who by speaking persuade one that the heaven is a stove and that it is around us, and we are charcoals. If someone gives them money, they teach him how to win both just and unjust causes by speaking.”⁵ Strepsiades has in mind to commit an injustice and is drawn to Socrates’ school due to its questionable reputation. When his loyalty to his family pushes him to forsake his obligations to the city, Strepsiades

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¹In this way, the problem of Socrates shares the same status as the nature of comedy – both are contingent on more serious themes. Both presuppose the existence of something more solemn, more necessary, for their full meaning to emerge. This is not the last time we will see an important similarity between Socrates and Aristophanes.

⁵Ibid., 94-98.
knows where to go for recourse.6 The Socrates of the *Clouds*, along with his followers, are sought only as a last resort by those who would forsake their obligations and duties with the aid of a charlatan’s power.

Aristophanes makes it clear from the beginning that the city looks upon Socrates with suspicion. Only those up to no good would associate with him or seek his assistance. This reputation is not to be understated, for it reveals both the city’s basic attitude toward Socrates, as well as the enigmatic character that gives rise to that attitude. Socrates’ influence is indirect, he does not seek out others or recruit followers openly. He is solitary and minds his own business, business that only he understands and pursues.7 As such, the city’s opinion of him is formed solely of its own perceptions — Aristophanes gives us no background against which we might understand this animosity. Nevertheless, once this unfavorable image has been cultivated, Aristophanes begins showing why, according to the city, Socrates deserves his reputation. Strepsiades’ desperate request of his son is met with a resounding no. Pheidippides will have no part of Socrates and his think-tank, as he is far too gentle to associate with the likes of Socrates

6“Further, the main idea of the play clearly is that Socrates and his ‘notion-shop’ were, in point of fact, so universally known that a country bumpkin who wished his son to get a training in ‘cuteness’ would at once think of Socrates and his friends as the natural quarter in which to apply. If the Athenians of 423 scarcely knew of Socrates at all and took little interest in his doings, how could Strepsiades be represented as taking it for granted that the ‘notion-shop’ was the proper school to which to take his lad?” A. E. Taylor, *Varia Socratica* (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1911), p. 133.

and his droll companions. He makes clear his disgust by saying, “ugh! Villains, I know. They’re boasters, pale, shoeless men that you’re speaking of.” Pheidippides wants nothing to do with Socrates and his asceticism, a practice that would interfere with his noble, youthful pursuits:

He lives entirely for his pleasures (cf. Anti-Right at 1079); morality and religion have their place only relatively to these. He is chronically disobedient in order to go on pursuing the horsey life (73ff); he even breaks an oath to his father when it turns out that he is being asked to do something that will make him look ridiculous in the eyes of his horse-racing companions (90f, 119f).

Even amongst the young Socrates has a poor reputation; he seems far from the one who would effectively corrupt the Athenian youth.

**Who Is Socrates?**

Given the way Aristophanes has introduced us to his caricature of Socrates, it is clear that the comic has deep reservations about the philosopher. By introducing him in the midst of a conflict between familial loyalty and civic duty, Aristophanes shows the relationship Socrates has to his surroundings is both suspicious and volatile. Yet, what is it about Socrates that has aroused the comic poet’s ire? Obviously to be held in low esteem and with suspicion suggests that Socrates is up to no good; one cannot help but to infer that Socrates’ inauspicious introduction in the *Clouds* is meant to draw attention to something the comic thought troubling. This must be related to who seeks admission to the think-tank, as well as what transpires within

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8 *Clouds*, 102-104.

the school. Pheidippides’ refusal to become Socrates’ pupil prompts Strepsiades to himself become Socrates’ pupil. This is the only recourse the farmer sees, and his motivations are telling, as he never once considers how he might legitimately extract himself from his debts. Not once does he think of ways in which he might repay his debts, being too far gone in his own despair and loathing to remain true to his obligations and duty. Strepsiades is imprudent, and his imprudence makes him a slave to the desires of his family, which in turn has led to the conflict between his family and the city. He is consumed with the thought of evading his creditors, a conviction that allows him to entertain any and all possibilities.

The only option that remains for the poor rustic is to try, despite his age and weak memory, to become a master of speeches. His hope is simple: he wishes for Socrates to teach him to be a clever sophist, one capable of manipulating men with a simple turn of words; “but teach me one of the two speeches, the one that pays nothing back.”

What makes Strepsiades’ case all the more interesting is that he makes no attempt to hide his intentions. No ulterior motivations or reasons are given for what the poor farmer is about to do; he displays his intentions openly and without reservation. Aristophanes’ main character is a man with a weak moral core, and it is precisely his tribulations that create the suspicion surrounding the Socrates of the *Clouds*.

Strepsiades’ introduction to Socrates is simple: he walks up to the door of the think tank and knocks. The think tank is conspicuously set apart from the city, wishing to be left alone, yet

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*Clouds*, 244 - 245.
it takes little effort on Strepsiades’ part to gain access. There are no guards at the door or secret passwords to remember; the student that answers the door only feebly protests Strepsiades’ unwelcome visit. The student is angry that Strepsiades has caused him to miscarry a thought, one he is not permitted to speak of except to Socrates’ initiates. It takes very little probing from Strepsiades, however, before the student reveals his inquiry, requiring of the old man only that “you must believe these things are Mysteries.” The student is more interested in his thoughts than with the integrity of the think tank’s security, and to the extent that the two come into conflict, the student shows a clear preference for inquiry and speeches over secrecy and exclusion. Socrates’ school is self-contained, seeking to keep to itself and minimize outside contact, yet any man, whatever his inclinations or motivations, can come and partake of the esoteric wisdom so long as he at least professes to keep it a secret.

It might be expected that Socrates would make a great effort to keep his secret wisdom a secret. The think tank is, however, anything but esoteric. The student pays no attention to what has brought Strepsiades to the think tank; he has no concern for what animates the old man’s eagerness. This indiscretion is crucial, as the preference for inquiry over the privacy of the think tank seems to be a trait the student has learned from Socrates himself. After being allowed into

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11Ibid., 143. Note here that the student either promptly recalls what he has miscarried, or his protestations to Strepsiades were insincere. If the latter, then one must wonder if it was not meant to test Strepsiades’ curiosity as the first initiating right. It should also be noted that Aristophanes associates mid-wifery with Socrates in much the same way as does Plato in his dialogues.
the think tank and seeing all the investigations in progress, Strepsiades is finally introduced to Socrates. When asked by Socrates what has brought him to the school, Strepsiades replies, “I wish to learn to be a speaker. I am plundered, I am pillaged by interest and most peevish creditors; my property is being seized by debts.” Socrates takes no real issue with these intentions, and ultimately requires of Strepsiades only that he become one of the initiates and pay homage to the Clouds in order to receive the wisdom he desires. Access to Socrates’ wisdom is then only for those deemed worthy, but the criteria for such worthiness are very slim indeed.

This short but rather telling description of Strepsiades’ introduction to the think tank provides us with a general framework out of which Aristophanes’ criticism of Socrates emerges. What Socrates knows or has uncovered is somehow a secret; the core of his wisdom must be kept from those not initiated into the Mysteries. Why this is the case we as yet do not know, but whatever the content of this knowledge, it is not to be disseminated widely and openly. Yet in a comic twist of irony, Socrates and his pupils do not seem to be very good at keeping secrets, as they divulge their hard-earned knowledge rather easily to an old man whom they do not know. Without losing much of the play’s literary uniqueness, a threat against which we must always be on guard, one is compelled to say that Aristophanes finds Socrates’ lack of prudence seriously problematic. By showing how easily Strepsiades gains access to the think tank, Aristophanes demonstrates Socrates’ imprudence in selecting his students. Precisely because he goes to such

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12Ibid., 239-242.
length at the beginning of the *Clouds* to show what kind of a man Strepsiades is, Aristophanes points us toward a lack of caution on the part of Socrates in terms of whom he allows into his confidence. There is great comedy in this point, as Socrates’ imprudence with regard to the secrecy of the school cannot help but be compared to Strepsiades’ imprudence with regard to the affairs of his family. Both men fail to take care of what is most immediately important to them, and because of this failure, both men act in a rather reckless fashion. By showing a parallel between the exalted philosopher and the ridiculous rustic, Aristophanes brings Socrates down to the level of the common man, and thus makes him appear ridiculous.

The comedy of viewing what is higher in light of what is lower does not, however, prevent us from seeing that Socrates’ imprudence is much more important than is Strepsiades’. Quite the opposite, the problem with Socrates’ nonchalance is clear: what if Strepsiades acquires the knowledge and ability he seeks? He would be able to avoid paying his debts or facing any negative consequences associated with his actions. Strepsiades would be liberated from the constraints that bind him, but it is a liberation that comes at a price to his community and its laws; “When a man agrees to undertake future actions, such as paying his debts, his life gains continuity and permanence. This comes through accepting the restraints that Strepsiades finds

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13 It is true that at 241 Socrates asks Strepsiades how he has come into such debt, a question that shows Socrates is not completely ignorant of the motivations of his students. These motivations do not deter Socrates, however, as he still agrees to take on Strepsiades as a student, regardless of what he will do with his instruction. One could say of this short but significant exchange that precisely because Socrates is at least superficially aware of what his students seek he is guilty of imprudence to an even greater degree.
so burdensome. To eliminate the need to act within the confines of time, as Strepsiades wants to do, is to uproot life from its necessary context.”

The comedy of tying the higher together with the lower enables us to see that Socrates’ imprudence is a much greater threat than is Strepsiades’, for without the former, the latter would have no recourse. The one who should be more diligent because he is wise turns into a caricature precisely because he is as naive as those who are not wise.

If the criticism of Socrates in the Clouds is that he is imprudent with regard to whom he accepts as a student, then that criticism stands in need of support. It is insufficient to call Socrates irresponsible and imprudent for providing open access to his knowledge if the character of that knowledge is unknown. Why is it that Socrates’ wisdom is a problem? As we have seen, Strepsiades gave us some insight into this wisdom when he told Pheidippides that Socrates and his followers teach heaven to be like a stove, men to be like charcoals, and both just and unjust causes can be won through the clever use of speech. Strepsiades’ introduction to the think tank goes on to fill out this enigmatic statement by giving several examples of Socrates’ investigations in action. The first three mysteries that Socrates’ pupil reveals to Strepsiades are stories of seemingly ridiculous investigations. They are ridiculous because they are concerned with what appears to be the most trivial things, investigations that have no apparent merit or worth.


15Clouds, 94-98.
In his think tank, Socrates focuses his attention on things that, by any reasonable standard, seem quite foolish. Because Socrates is concerned with matters that border on the absurd, the nature of his wisdom is called into question; “the master and his thoughtless disciples spend a great deal of time speculating about the matters related to astronomy and geography, about things in the sky and below the earth, and about things such as the length of the jump of a flea and similar subjects.” Once the reader stops laughing at the happenings within the think tank, he can begin to see that Aristophanes is making an important point, one that requires moving beyond the silly caricature. Mary Nichols points out in her study of Aristophanes and Socrates that:

> Through the absurdities of Socrates’ undertaking, Aristophanes suggests that the Socratics believe that they are more permanent than they are, at the same time that they view their relationships in terms of body. Other Socratic activities reveal a similar paradox: the denial of body accompanies a full-scale immersion into the body. Although Socrates suspends himself in the air, he is occupied primarily, as we shall see, by most earthy matter.

The happenings within the think tank are no great thing, for in themselves they show Socrates and his followers to be foolish, and hence, ridiculous. Aristophanes’ Socrates is the perfect absent-minded intellectual, his constant attention to the things above and below make him oblivious to the things present at hand.

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17 Mary Nichols, *Socrates and the Political Community*, p. 10.
Yet these interests must have dangerous ramifications if the lax security of the think tank is to be considered imprudent. There is no moralism to be found in Aristophanes’ criticisms; the caricature of Socrates is not meant to extol the virtue of a more practical way of life by ridiculing a purely theoretical one. Instead, it is meant to draw our attention to Socrates’ relationship to the community, and in so doing, to demonstrate the ramifications and hence the imprudence of Socrates’ not keeping his philosophizing a secret. It is insufficient to say that otherwise odd speculations are simply ridiculous, for doing so would suggest that the theoretical has no life of its own, a suggestion, which as we will see, our comic poet would not support. What Socrates is doing must be somehow dangerous, dangerous in the implications his investigations have for the community at large. To understand this requires us to see in what ways Socrates’ philosophizing is at odds with the community, which it must be if Aristophanes’ caricature is to be at all meaningful. Thus, we must look for the most important point at which philosophy and politics intersect to understand the essence of Socrates’ imprudence. Fortunately we do not have to look far, as the comic points us right at it: the gods of the city.

Once he has made Socrates’ acquaintance, Strepsiades begs to be taught the art of speaking so that he might alleviate himself of his debts. In exchange for this wisdom, Strepsiades offers to pay Socrates whatever he wants, an offer for which he is willing to swear an oath.18

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18Cf. Clouds, 243-246. Note the irony in this passage. Strepsiades offers to oblige himself in order to get what he wishes, an obligation he would then be able to circumvent with the wish granted.
Socrates immediately corrects Strepsiades, however, asking him, “what gods indeed will you swear by! For first of all, we don’t credit gods.”!9 Given the character of Socrates’ response, as well as the nature of the studies that occur in the think-tank, it becomes clear that Aristophanes’ Socrates is no adherent to the city’s religion and does not believe in the city’s gods. In place of those gods Socrates does not substitute other gods, nor does he replace them with higher divinities.20 Instead, Socrates teaches his students to understand the world in naturalistic, if not

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19Ibid., 247-8.

20Are not Socrates’ divinities the Clouds? This is true, but it must be properly understood. The nature of the Clouds is a matter of much controversy, not a little of which is due to their rather enigmatic motivations. Remember that our first introduction to the Clouds is by way of Socrates, who invokes them as a substitute to Zeus. They seem to be closely allied with Socrates, yet at crucial times (such as during the parabasis, from 563-626), the Clouds invoke the Greek Gods not to disprove or disparage them, but to be included amongst them. The Clouds and Socrates seem to have quite different agendas, as is seen when Aristophanes identifies himself, during the first parabasis, with the Clouds (518-562), a fact that would mitigate against a close alliance with Socrates. Second, the Clouds ultimately disavow a direct connection with Socrates by being supporters of traditional justice, as is evident from their response to Strepsiades’ fate (1454-1455). West sums up Socrates’ relationship with the Clouds nicely when he says, “But does Socrates not believe the Clouds to be Zeus-like deities? He does tell Strepsiades to regard the Clouds as gods. They are heavenly beings that imitate the forms of all things. Yet after Strepsiades is taken indoors for instruction, Socrates never again refers to the Clouds as gods. Instead, he speaks mostly of “air” and equivalents (627), as does Strepsiades (667). Apparently the teaching that the Clouds are gods is part of Socrates’ exoteric introduction for beginners, a teaching which is modified or dropped during the indoor or esoteric instruction.” Thomas West, “Introduction,” Four Texts on Socrates, trans. Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 32. Nussbaum also echoes West’s sentiments. Cf. Nussbaum, pg. 76. One would do well to compare the relationship between Socrates and the Clouds with what Kierkegaard says about comic irony, “Irony, on the other hand, is simultaneously a new position and as such is absolutely polemical toward early Greek culture. It is a position that continually cancels itself; it is a nothing that devours everything, and a something one can never grab hold of, something that is and is not at the same time, but
mechanistic, terms. The investigations in the think tank that appeared ridiculous are in fact
dangerous because their orientation differs fundamentally from that of the city. The traditional
deities of the city are no longer the orienting principle of the universe, and Socrates’ substitute –
the vortex – is an elemental cause of motion that tears asunder any notion of a higher being at
play in the universe. 21 Divine order is replaced with mechanistic order, and as such, the idea of a
god or gods that takes part in the material universe is rendered useless, if not ridiculous. The
city’s gods no longer have control over the universe, and their will is no longer that which orders
the universe and gives it meaning.

The role that ethereal vortex plays in Socrates’ cosmology helps us to understand better
why he and his students were engaged in investigations that seemed, at first glance, to be so
foolish. To investigate nature, a nature understood here to be devoid of any traces of the divine,
is to understand better the nature of being. Any examination, no matter how seemingly trivial or
foolish, provides access to the inter-workings of the cosmos. As ridiculous as studying the
intestines of a gnat or the length of a flea’s jump may appear, these phenomena are as they are
because they cannot be any other way. Their material natures have properties that behave in

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something that at rock bottom is comic.” Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony, p. 131.

21 Cf, Clouds, 365b-380b.
strictly determined fashions, and thus their very nature, no matter how small and insignificant, nonetheless provides a glimpse into the nature of the whole.\textsuperscript{22}

We are now in a position to understand why Socrates’ imprudence is dangerous. Socrates’ atheism, or at least his wholly materialistic cosmology, robs the city of one of its most precious foundations: the notion that there is cosmic support for justice.\textsuperscript{23} The materialistic orientation of the think-tank is a problem for the city because the city is a political community, one that involves the maintenance of and adherence to its laws:

\textsuperscript{22}Socrates’ philosophy suggests that all phenomena, including human things such as justice, love, politics, and community can be reduced to material explanations. As Mary Nichols observes, “In Strepsiades’ understanding of Socrates’ description of thought, Aristophanes lets us see the Socratics’ own lack of self-understanding their “suspension” suggests their mind’s independence of matter, while their study of the world reduces mind to matter.” Nichols, p.12.

\textsuperscript{23}Dover sums up nicely the tension between philosophy and the foundations of the city when he says, “Our own civilization is so accustomed to explaining in terms of general scientific laws the events of the world in which we live that we tend to assume that even the most intractable and complex events, including patterns of our own behaviour, are ultimately and in principle explicable in scientific terms; for us the question is not which events are acts of God, but whether there is a divine agent at all. When we look back in time two thousand years or more we make the acquaintance of cultures in which the boundary between ‘act’ and ‘event’ is quite different both in location and in nature. Fifth-century Greece produced some individuals of extraordinary intellectual penetration, who speculated on the structure and history of the universe in terms of natural, intelligible processes from which the acts of personal gods were excluded; but in the same city as such an individual, often perhaps in the same household, we should find a majority for whom a strong wind was a person who decided when he would blow, a blight on the crops the manifestation of a god’s anger for a sacrifice promised but not performed, and a sudden bright idea the intervention of an unseen being in the mental processes of an individual.” K. J. Dover,\textit{ Aristophanic Comedy} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pg. 31.
Socrates’ search for universals therefore leads to a dehumanization of men. More specifically, Aristophanes’ Socrates does not take the beliefs and the authority of the city seriously. He denies both the existence of the city’s gods and the sacredness of familial bonds as a result of his investigations of natural phenomena. He leads his disciples to look at the world as scientists rather than citizens. Free from society’s restraints, they disdain as merely conventional the piety and justice that support families and cities. Socrates therefore undermines these associations in which Aristophanes thought men could best find happiness.24

The laws of the city have cosmic support because they have a divine orientation; Zeus dispenses divine retribution to those who would transgress the law yet escape human consequences.25 When Socrates rebukes Strepsiades by saying, “What Zeus! Don’t babble. Zeus doesn’t even exist,” he is indirectly undercutting the foundations of the city and its laws.26 From the city’s perspective, Socrates became a teacher of injustice, indirectly to be sure, but guilty nevertheless because he failed to make sure those he taught could be trusted not to break the basic conventions of the community. Even if Socrates has no intentions of harming the city and its laws, he is nonetheless dangerous because his investigations, especially in the hands of those who are...

24Nichols, p. 3.

25Dover also makes this point when, in discussing the relationship between Greek philosophy and religion in the fifth century, he says, “Hesiod had described Justice as the rule which Zeus had laid down for the life of human society, and personified her as the minister of Zeus. Popular morality was tenacious of the idea that the unjust man, the perjurer, the defaulting debtor, even if he escapes human detection and punishment, nevertheless meets with his deserts at the hands of the gods; or, if he dies secure and happy, his descendants pay the penalty after him; or again . . . his soul pays the penalty in he underworld. To criticize the divine genealogies propounded by the poets and to attribute the working of the universe to impersonal physical forces uninterested in human behaviour was to lift from the ingenious and the aggressive fears which were believed to have constrained them to obey the law.” Dover, pg. 112.

already inclined toward mischief, present a direct threat to the very essence of the political community.27

The point of this story seems straightforward enough. The problem of Socrates is that Socrates is imprudent, and his imprudence has dire consequences indeed. And as the introduction of the Clouds gives way to the rest of the play, one can see just how much of a problem Socrates and his think-tank are. Strepsiades never acquires the knowledge he seeks; he is simply too old and too dull to become a sophisticated speaker. His time spent with Socrates has influenced him, though, as can be seen from the manner in which he deals with the creditors who have come to collect their debts.28 Moreover, the true perniciousness of Socrates’ influence comes to light

27 Oddly enough, this criticism is similar to the more modern one offered by Nietzsche. In The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche speaks not only of the essential relationship between Hellenic life and the tragic art, but also of Socrates and his cancerous rationalism. For Nietzsche, it is the Greek art of tragedy, that unity of the Dionysian and Apollonian, which creates the very fabric of Greek life, and to which Socrates poses the greatest of threats. Socrates represents the embodied hero of Apollo, that champion of individuation that upsets the balance between unity and singularity. When speaking of the mystery doctrine of tragedy, Nietzsche emphasizes the “. . . fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primary cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), p.74). It speaks to the fascinating link between Aristophanes and Nietzsche that if one merely reverses the words, one could derive not only a brilliant summation of Aristophanes’ caricature, but also a subtle glimpse at Nietzsche’s Socrates; “. . . fundamental knowledge of the individuation of everything existent, the conception of oneness as the primary cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of oneness may be broken in augury of a restored individuation (italics added).” Cf. The Birth of Tragedy, section 10.

28 Cf. Clouds, 1215-1300.
It is important to note that Aristophanes does not show us what Socrates teaches Pheidippides. His instruction is given indoors, and as such, we are not privy to its content. We may infer its general content, however, by comparing what we knew of Socrates before he takes Pheidippides as his student with what Pheidippides knows or is capable of after emerging from the think-tank. Whatever it was Socrates has taught him, it is somehow related to his newfound taste for Euripides.

During the final scenes of the play, when Strepsiades receives, in many respects, exactly what he has requested. Pheidippides has taken his father’s place as Socrates’ student and has learned what his father could not. His success in the think-tank allows Strepsiades to evade the claims of his creditors, and as such, disentangles him from the web of constraints that first motivated his interest in Socrates.

Strepsiades’ freedom from his debts comes at a price, however, and he soon regrets his association with the think-tank. Pheidippides has learned about material nature and clever speech with the consequence that the young man does not fear the gods of the city, and thus has no problems breaking the conventions that hold the city together.29 Unluckily for Strepsiades, this includes the conventions that uphold the traditional family. Socrates’ philosophizing poses a danger to both the family and the city largely because the foundations that uphold one also uphold the other. The family needs the city and its laws, and when the support for justice in the city is undercut, so too is the support for the family. Pheidippides will not only evade the creditors without remorse, but will also beat his father as he deems fit. Because Socrates has taught the young man to understand things according to nature, he understands only what seems fit according to nature. For this reason, he beats his less-wise father when the old man deserves it.

29It is important to note that Aristophanes does not show us what Socrates teaches Pheidippides. His instruction is given indoors, and as such, we are not privy to its content. We may infer its general content, however, by comparing what we knew of Socrates before he takes Pheidippides as his student with what Pheidippides knows or is capable of after emerging from the think-tank. Whatever it was Socrates has taught him, it is somehow related to his newfound taste for Euripides.
due to his aged ignorance, and threatens to do the same to his mother.\textsuperscript{30} Socrates’ influence has undermined not only the city’s foundations, but also the family’s, and threatens to undo the very fabric within which human life flourishes:

\textit{. . . he is shown to be at least culpably negligent in his indifference to the antecedent moral training of the pupil: he mocks habituation without acknowledging that it might be essential in forming a pupil’s moral intuitions to a point at which the search for justification can appropriately begin. He entrusts the weapons of argumentation to anyone who will expose himself to teaching, without considering whether he is one of the people who will be likely to put the teaching to good use.}\textsuperscript{31}

The problem of Socrates, then, comes to light as the tension between philosophy and the community, with the implication being that Socrates’ way of life is mortally dangerous to the community. Without cosmic support, neither the family nor the city can continue to exist, and despite the differences that separate family and country, differences that from the beginning motivated Strepsiades to seek out Socrates, neither can exist without the other or without the gods that support both. Strepsiades thought he could evade his obligations to the city for the sake of his family, but the means for doing so ultimately led to the undermining of both the city and the family. The futility of Strepsiades’ actions makes clear not only his ridiculousness, but his imprudence, and in so doing, also highlights the danger of Socrates’ imprudence. The \textit{Clouds}

\textsuperscript{30}As Strauss points out, “There is nevertheless an obvious connection between incest and father-beating: both crimes destroy the family.” (Leo Strauss, \textit{Socrates and Aristophanes} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 40). The suggestion of Pheidippides’ beating his own mother casts an added element of intrigue to the story, one that goes to the core of not only Socrates’ teachings regarding nature, but also the relationship between Socrates and Euripides. Cf. \textit{Clouds} 1365-1375.

\textsuperscript{31}Nussbaum, p. 80.
seems intent on warning us of this problematic relationship between philosophy and the city, especially as it plays itself out from the perspective of the city. With that said, however, one must ask to whom the message is directed? Is this a warning to the city about the impact of Socrates and his philosophizing, or is it a warning to Socrates himself?

Before we answer this, let us pause for a moment to recap what we have now learned. The introduction to the *Clouds* provides a solid framework from which we can better understand not only the historical Socrates, but also his civic character. Socrates the man, according to Aristophanes, was marked most importantly by his imprudence, imprudence that the *Clouds* portrays as a defect or vice. Socrates is first and foremost imprudent because he does not concern himself with whom he allows into his think-tank. There are no admission standards for Socrates’ school, and because of this anyone may enter and partake of Socrates’ wisdom. By not being more prudent with regard to whom he allows in, Socrates exposes himself and his wisdom to those who might use this wisdom for ill-gotten gains. So it is with Strepsiades, who seeks out Socrates not to be a thinker and partner in his investigations, but in order to get out of his debts.

Socrates’ imprudence is related to his orientation. To put this another way, the Socrates of the *Clouds* does not have time to think seriously about his students because he is preoccupied with his investigations. The think-tank is characterized by its seemingly foolish interests, interests that aspire to great heights but which are in fact tethered to lowly matters. Socrates’ philosophizing is speculation concerning bodies, and as such, his focus is on the material aspect
of being to the exclusion of any other. This comic turn makes Socrates appear ridiculous, as a man who finds his happiness considering the intestines of gnats and the feet of fleas.

But it also shows us more. Within the laughter there is always an element of the serious, which is why Socrates’ imprudence is more than just a matter for joking. Socrates’ imprudence is also dangerous, and the threat he poses to the family and community alike is the basis from which his imprudence and foolishness originate. He does not believe in Zeus, and he teaches his students to not believe in Zeus. It is true that, for the most part, this disbelief is confined to the think-tank, and hence, does not present itself as a problem. But because he is imprudent, his disbelief has wider ramifications. He becomes dangerous to the entire community because he is unaware of his settings; he seems to have no idea that his investigations and theories are detrimental to the city’s foundations. Socrates does not understand the city, he does not understand what binds it together and makes it whole:

Aristophanes is critical of Socratic philosophy and dramatizes the harm to political communities and family life that Socrates causes. According to Aristophanes, philosophy leads to abstractions that detach men from their concrete lives, to universalities that remove them from the relationship they form in families and political communities. From Aristophanes’ point of view, Socrates denies the fundamental truth about human beings, namely, that their lives develop and mature only in limited and particular settings.\textsuperscript{32}

Because of the degree to which it is imprudent, Aristophanes’ caricature of Socrates stands out boldly, and the subtle message of the \textit{Clouds} is clear: the community views Socrates as a threat, and with good reason.

\textsuperscript{32}Nichols, p 2.
The Problem of Socrates

If we were to stop here, the sketch of the historical Socrates would appear to be largely complete. We now seem to see who Socrates was, and why Aristophanes had such serious reservation about him. Socrates was a citizen in name only; a model of citizenship based on Socrates is at best a joke. What we lack, however, is a compelling account of Socrates’ distinctiveness, or, more precisely, a persuasive reason why it was that Socrates was so imprudent as to be dangerous. Socrates shares his position of infamy with several other prominent Athenians, such as Lamachus and Cleon, as those Aristophanes deemed worthy of mocking. As Solomos has observed, “His heroes, when they are real characters, will always be prominent Athenian statesmen, generals, or tragic poets. So the fact alone that he dedicates a whole play to Socrates signifies that he picks him out as the most important, and for that reason, the most dangerous, teacher of the young.”

33 Aristophanes mocks Lamachus in Acharnians and Cleon in Peace (amongst other places).

34 Alexis Solomos, The Living Aristophanes (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1974), p. 111. Many scholars presume this statement wrongly put, for to them Socrates does not represent distinctiveness, but sameness. For instance, Bowie includes Socrates in a class of “miracle–workers” (including Pythagoras, Empedocles, Parmenides, Orpheus, Abaris, Aristeas, and Epimenides), men who were at odds with the city and its religion (A.M. Bowie. Aristophanes: Myth, Ritual and Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.113). I follow Solomos’ reasoning that Aristophanes’ choice of Socrates in particular is decisive, and go further by suggesting that this decisiveness does not suggest Socrates was the quintessential or paradigmatic example of a “type” or group. Instead, based on what will follow, I hope to make the case that Socrates was unique, and that the plot of the Clouds revolves around that uniqueness.
more so than any of his contemporary philosophers or sophists.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, the reason for Socrates’ imprudence must be of utmost importance, as it is why Socrates is deserving of a caricature.

Or is it? As it stands now, one could say of Socrates and his imprudence that it stems from an orientation he shares, at least theoretically, with other philosophers at the time, men who also attempted to give an account of the whole of nature without having any reference to a divine source.\textsuperscript{36} There is even evidence within the \textit{Clouds} that Aristophanes associates Socrates with other “pre”- Socratic philosophers and cosmologists.\textsuperscript{37} If Socrates’ imprudence is the result of his bodily philosophy, it only stands to reason that his distinctiveness is to be found in his preeminence as a philosopher of nature. Could it be that Aristophanes chose Socrates because Socrates represented the preeminent natural philosopher in Athens?

If this were the case, and Socrates was really no different in kind than the other philosophers in Athens at the time, then our access to the historical Socrates is irrelevant, for he offers us little uniqueness beyond what is known in principle of Thales, Anaxagoras, or Pythagoras for example. Even if Socrates was the preeminent philosopher of nature at the time of

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\textsuperscript{35} Cf. \textit{Clouds}, 523-524.
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\textsuperscript{36} The scholarship on Socrates’ relationship to other philosophers of nature is as diverse as it is extensive. For a sample of this scholarship, see Zeller, \textit{Socrates and the Socratic Schools} (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885), pp. 39-51, or Winspear, \textit{Who Was Socrates?} (New Jersey: Quinn & Boden Company, Inc., 1939).
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\textsuperscript{37} The \textit{Clouds} refers directly to Thales (180) and Prodicus (361), and indirectly to Diogenes of Apollonia (234). The implication that men are like charcoal and that heaven is like a stove (94-97) is linked with Hippon, Meton, and Heraclitus. Cf. West’s notes 22, 38, and 46.
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the play, a supposition for which there is no evidence, there would still be nothing distinctive about him as an individual within the caricature. Why, for instance, was it Socrates among the natural philosophers who was so imprudent as to be dangerous? Aristophanes’ selection of Socrates as the basis for his caricature should tell us something important about Socrates the man as a man, not as a member of a class. There should be some evidence in the Clouds that we initially overlooked but that better explains Socrates’ uniqueness. We find this at second

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38 One must remember that natural philosophy had already become somewhat suspect by the time of Socrates, as is evidenced by the prosecution of Anaxagoras on the grounds of impiety; “He (Anaxagoras) moved to Athens, where he lived for thirty years. While there he was an associate of Pericles, the great Athenian statesman. This political connection and his scientific views led to his prosecution and conviction (probably c. 450) for impiety, on the grounds that he believed the sun to be not a god but a fiery stone. Anaxagoras thus has the honor of being the first philosopher prosecuted at Athens.” Richard McKirahan, Philosophy Before Socrates (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), p. 200. McKirahan also reminds us that there is evidence Protagoras had been banned due to his philosophizing. If all of this is true, why did Socrates the natural philosopher become the subject of the play when there were clearly better examples to be had?

39 To this end, Mary Nichols cannot be correct in suggesting that Socrates’ bodily philosophizing is the theme and target of the Clouds. (Nichols, Socrates and the Political Community, pp. 10-15). Instead, the characterization of Socrates’ philosophy as bodily seems to be part of the general caricature meant to show the humor in the unfettered aspirations of the character, i.e., the search for universal truth and freedom from the particular. Showing this does not mean, however, that the search necessarily shows itself to be bodily; quite the opposite, the problems seems to lie in the fact that Socrates’ philosophizing does not take proper heed of the body.

40 Moreover, is it not Socrates and Plato who are credited with being the founders of political philosophy, an honor that sets them apart from the others? Cf. Plato’s Phaedo 96a - 100b
glance, as a closer examination shows Socrates to be a more complex figure than was originally thought.

It is true that Aristophanes casts Socrates as a buffoon who confuses the quest for universals with a reduction of all phenomena to bodies. This is not to say, however, that he is simply a materialist. Socrates’ investigations may lack a certain seriousness, but this does not mean that the study of bodies or matter excludes human phenomena from the realm of inquiry. On the contrary, Socrates separates himself from other philosophers of nature in that he is also interested in human things, and he demonstrates this interest in subtle yet important ways.\footnote{Note here that Socrates’ awareness of human things suggests that he has already made his famous “turn” that led him from natural philosophy toward what might now be called “ethics” or moral philosophy. It is interesting to speculate on the reasons for this turn, especially in light of what will be Socrates’ distinctiveness.}  

First, when he introduces Strepsiades to the Clouds, Socrates explains their ability to change form by suggesting that they mimic the dispositions of men, and then illustrates this with reference to men such as Xenophantus, Simon, Cleonymus, and Cleisthenes.\footnote{Clouds, 349-355.} Socrates knows the names of several prominent Athenians, a sign he is not totally ignorant of his setting. Moreover, his awareness of their reputations suggests that his knowledge is not totally circumscribed by the think tank’s investigations. Socrates knows of the city outside of the think tank well enough to know the rumors that surround many of its citizens.
Secondly, when Strepsiades takes Pheidippides to the think tank to be educated, Socrates brings out Just and Unjust speech so that the young man and his father may hear the education each proposes. That Socrates keeps both on the grounds of the think tank suggests he has some use for them, or that they are of some interest to him. It may even incline some to believe that Socrates’ imprudence is linked with his sophistry, teaching others to win arguments regardless of their merit or consequences.43 He does, after all, promise to make Pheidippides into the perfect sophist, a promise that suggests he is aware of his abilities to teach persuasion.44 In fact, in light of this more comprehensive view, one could say that Socrates represents the quintessential sophist, one possessing rhetorical abilities grounded in a mechanistic philosophy that frees him from any conventional moral obstacles. Such a view is not altogether implausible, for Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy* that:

To the influence of Socrates and Euripides they attributed the fact that the old Marathonian stalwart fitness of body and soul was being sacrificed more and more to a dubious enlightenment that involved the progressive degeneration of the powers of body and soul. It is in this tone, half indignant, half contemptuous, that Aristophanic comedy used to speak of both of them – to the consternation of modern men, who are quite willing to give up Euripides, but who cannot give

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43 One must remember here Socrates’ reputation that initially drew Strepsiades to the think-tank. Consider also Eric Voegelin’s remarks on the subject; “When we read Antiphon we can understand the wrath that a conservative like Aristophanes displays in the Clouds against the sophists, especially in the contest between the allegoric figures of Dikaios Logos and Adikos Logos; and if Antiphon is typical for a class of literature, one must admit that the great comedian had hardly any room left for satirical exaggeration.” Eric Voegelin, “The World of the Polis,” *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 15 (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 393.

44 *Clouds*, 1111.
sufficient expression to their astonishment that in Aristophanes Socrates should appear as the first
and supreme Sophist, as the mirror and epitome of all sophistical tendencies.45

Is not the teaching of the Clouds, then, that Socrates’ imprudence is dangerous to the city
because he is the perfect sophist?

As surely as the characterization of Socrates as a mechanistic natural philosopher was too
simplistic, however, just as surely does the sophistic condemnation fall short. There is
something important missing if our final word is that Aristophanes believed Socrates to be the
preeminent sophist. Socrates does not fit the traditional sophist mold, and in three crucial
respects his difference from that mold is decisive. First, Aristophanes makes no mention of, nor
gives any evidence that Socrates took pay for his teachings. True, Strepsiades offers to pay
Socrates whatever price for his teaching, but Socrates shows no interest in Strepsiades’ offer.46
Socrates himself mentions Hyperbolus as someone who has learned the art of rhetoric for a price,
but does not suggest that he was Hyperbolus’ teacher.47 Aristophanes even has Strepsiades give
Socrates a gift when he returns to reclaim his son, but there is no suggestion that the gift was a
previously negotiated payment.48 Thus, Socrates may eagerly teach students, but he does not do

45 Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy, pp. 86-87.

46 Clouds, 245. Compare also West’s note 48 with Kenneth Dover, “Socrates in the
Clouds,” The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Gregory Vlastos (Notre

47 Ibid., 876. Cf. West’s note 149.

48 Ibid., 1147.
so for the sake of pay. Socrates is indifferent to those goods that typically motivated the teachers of rhetoric.

The second way in which Socrates differs decidedly from the traditional sophist mold is that he does not appear to teach the unjust speech. It is of course true that Strepsiades goes to the think tank to learn the unjust speech, and even sends his son there to learn it as well, but Aristophanes never tells us that Socrates directly teaches such speech. Socrates does teach about nature and linguistic precision, but the *Clouds* gives us no clues that Socrates is a proponent of Unjust speech. He keeps both Just and Unjust speech on the grounds of the think tank, and there is no evidence that would lead us to believe that he is partial to the claims of Unjust speech. Quite the contrary, the third and final respect in which he differs from the traditional sophistical mold is that he is painfully at odds with the claims of Unjust speech. Unjust speech ridicules the traditionally stern, masculine virtue of Just speech, proposing instead a soft, effeminate alternative that delights in excessive sensual pleasures. As West points out, though, Socrates is no proponent of Unjust speech’s virtue:

Unjust speech is popular in Athens (920), while Socrates is ignored or despised by all (102-104). Unjust speech praises indulgence in pleasures, but Socrates teaches extreme self-denial. Although Unjust Speech claims to appeal to nature, he follows the same standards – poetry and public opinion – as Just speech. Unjust Speech endorses openly the homosexual pleasures covertly preferred by Just Speech. Unjust Speech despises conventionality, but only for the sake of conventionality’s secret convictions about the good. In short, neither Just nor Unjust Speech transcends the plane of received opinion; unlike both, Socrates in the *Clouds* resolutely pursues knowledge of nature by learning.⁴⁹

⁴⁹West, “Introduction,” *Four Texts on Socrates*, pp. 33-34.
In many ways the sophists as a whole were very much like Unjust speech. They sought to manipulate speech, and hence the balance between nature and convention, but for the sake of what was held up as good by convention. The sophists and Unjust speech are thus alike in that they show themselves to be radically conventional; their motivations, despite the means chosen, are wholly determined through the ends circumscribed by convention. But it is Socrates, however, who is painfully at odds with convention, so much so that Socrates’ motivations appear completely foreign to convention because he does not value that which convention values.\(^{50}\) Thus, given that Socrates takes no pay for teaching, concerns himself with human things, and does not endorse the claims of Unjust speech, it seems clear enough that Socrates’ imprudence is not the result of his sophistry.\(^{51}\)

\(^{50}\) As an aside that nevertheless goes together with our broader theme, Socrates was a citizen of Athens, unlike many if not most of the sophists who were foreigners brought in to teach for pay. Socrates’ imprudence is thus exacerbated all the more because his civic responsibility is not shared by the sophists.

\(^{51}\) Nussbaum adds to this when she says, “The comic character’s emphasis on self-inquiry and self-knowledge, and his apparent goal of achieving and imparting human wisdom (841) are thoroughly Socratic. The emphasis, especially in the debate, on training relevant to moral and political decision-making also marks Socrates off from both the early natural scientists and from many of the sophists, those whose emphasis was on rhetorical style, grammar and language. Nussbaum, p. 75. Kierkegaard also makes this point about the Sophists and Socrates that must not be overlooked; “. . . it is immediately apparent that Aristophanes has not identified him with the Sophists, not only by his having made Socrates recognizable by a variety of minor traits . . ., but also and mainly by his describing Socrates’ position as one of complete isolation.” Kierdegaard, The Concept of Irony, p. 146.
A Warning in a Comic Defense

What, then, is the cause of Socrates’ imprudence? To answer this, let us take a wider look, one that will require us to look at the author himself. We remarked in the beginning of this examination that the Clouds appears to be written from the perspective of the community. There is a great deal of truth in this, but it must be properly understood. Socrates’ imprudence, his bodily or material philosophy, and his atheism are problematic from the city’s standpoint, but the defense of the city offered by the Clouds is not grounded in that standpoint. Instead, Aristophanes has chosen to caricature Socrates, and this means offering only a comic defense. A comic defense can at best be a half-hearted defense, if one at all, and must transcend the sphere from which it emerges. When Socrates is condemned for his imprudence, the condemnation does not take on a moralistic or prudish tone as might be expected from one whose boundaries have been transgressed. There is no indignation to be found in the Clouds.52 Aristophanes is not

52Listen to Zeller as he describes Aristophanes and his comedies in a rather un-Aristophanic way: “This poet is an enthusiastic admirer of the good old time as he paints it with its steady morality, its strict education, its military prowess, its orderly and prudent administration. He warms to his subject whenever he speaks of the days of Marathon. With ruthless satire, now in the form of bantering jest, now in that of bitter earnestness, he lashes innovations which have supplanted time–honoured institutions–democracy running riot with demagogues and sycophants; poetry, empty, effeminate, free–thinking, faithless to its moral purpose, degraded from its artistic height; sophistic culture with its fruitless speculations, dangerous alike to faith and morals, the producer of shameless quibblers, atheistic rationalisers, or conscienceless perverters of justice, instead of steady citizens and sober–minded men. Love of what is ancient is with him undeniably an affair of personal conviction. Of this his zeal is proof, the warmth and classic beauty of those passages which tell the praise of the olden time and its ways.” Zeller, Socrates, pp. 29-30.
above mocking the traditional notions of justice, or the gods for that matter, and how much the comic truly respects the wisdom of the city must take into account the fact that Socrates’ imprudence stems from his not appreciating the stupidity or depravity of his potential students.53 As one scholar has put it, “how could one who attacked Socrates and Euripides for their views about the gods permit himself to portray the divinities in such a ridiculous and despicable guise?”54

In this way, Aristophanes finds himself writing from a perspective that is above that of the city’s; he is in many ways as distant from the city and its horizons as is Socrates. He can caricature both Just and Unjust speech in his play because he can see through the claims of each, down to the inconsistent conventions upon which both are based, and free himself from their charms. But this does not lead Aristophanes to leave behind the family and the city for a broader, more theoretical perspective. No, the comic stays within the horizons of the city, even if it is at an uncomfortable distance, and accepts these horizons as necessary if he and others like him are

53 Strauss says of Aristophanes’ relationship to the laws and gods of the city that, “The action of at least some of his comedies expresses this characteristic of Aristophanes’ thought. In the Knights, the Wasps, the Peace, the Birds, the Thesmophoriazusae, and the Assembly of Women, the restoration of soundness in politics is effected by radically novel means, by means which are incompatible with the end, i.e., the ancestral polity and its spirit. Aristophanes did not, then, have any delusions about the politically problematic character of his political message.” Strauss, The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism, p. 112.

to exist and flourish. Aristophanes might be guilty in principle of many of the same faults as Socrates, but it is in their relationship to the city that they differ most profoundly:

One is tempted to say that his comedies celebrate the victory of nature, as it reveals itself in the pleasant, over convention or law, which is the locus of the noble and the just. Lest this be grossly misunderstood, one must add immediately two points. In the first place, if *nomos* is viewed in the light of nature, the Aristophanean comedy is based on knowledge of nature and therefore on consciousness of the sublime pleasures accompanying knowledge of nature. Above all, Aristophanes has no doubt as to the fact that nature, human nature, is in need of *nomos*. Aristophanes does not reject *nomos*, but he attempts to bring to light its problematic and precarious status, its status in between the needs of the body and the needs of the mind; for if one does not understand the precarious status of *nomos*, one is bound to have unreasonable expectations of *nomos*.\(^{55}\)

Despite transcending the horizon of the city, Aristophanes nevertheless returns to the city; the freedom of the comic’s mind is tempered by the constraints of his soul and body. He does not share Socrates’ radical indifference to his fellow citizens and city; he cannot look at the sun and a son with an equally indifferent eye as does Socrates. Strepsiades would not have sought out Aristophanes for help; because he knows the potential conflict with the family, the comic poet understands that the city and its gods must be protected, even through laughter. Aristophanes’ grounding provides him with a vantage point from which he is able to mock that which is homeless in its own home. His caricature of Socrates has the effect of defending the city, even if it is a rather half-hearted defense. More importantly, it gives us access to that which we seek. Aristophanes has gone to great lengths to show those traits most characteristic of Socrates. Of all of these, none seems more decisive than his independence from the city.

Socrates’ philosophizing takes him far from the conventions that bind the city, and his inquiries have the effect of robbing the traditional myths of their dignity and power. But Socrates is not alone in his distance from the city; the comic himself demonstrates in his works just how removed he is from the traditional perspective of a citizen. The decisive difference, then, is that Aristophanes curbs the distance between himself and his fellow citizens. His play is not written from the unaltered perspective of the city, instead it is written from the perspective of someone who has seen through the conventional claims about the gods and about justice, but who nevertheless recognizes the importance of those claims. The freedom that Socrates seeks is an illusion, and although the caricature of that philosophy as bodily or material is more spoof than truth, it nonetheless makes clear the degree to which body and soul, at least for Socrates, are separate. This separation pushes Socrates away from the particular toward the universal, but in doing so, makes him neglect what is particular about himself. For him, as it is with all men, this means first and foremost the body, a body that always finds itself as a product of a family that is situated within a city. Aristophanes’ independence from the nomos of the city does not lead him away from the city as it does for Socrates; Aristophanes’ comedies are not imprudent. He sees the importance of the city and its gods, laws, and traditions, and even though his comedies have the effect, much as Socrates’ inquiries do, of destroying the solemnity that accompanies these sacred things, it nevertheless makes clear how and why those things are most important. Despite the great distance that separates him from the city, Aristophanes nevertheless comes to light in
The victory of the just, or the movement from the ridiculousness of contemporary political folly to ancient soundness, is a movement toward the ridiculous of a different kind. The just man is a man who minds his own business, the opposite of a busybody, the man who loves the retired, quiet, private life. Living at home, on his farm, he enjoys the simple natural pleasures: food, drink, and, last but by no means least, love. He enjoys these pleasures frankly. He gives his enjoyment a frank, a wholly unrestrained, expression. He calls a spade a spade. If he does this as a character on the stage, he says in public what cannot be said in public with propriety: he publishes that private which cannot with propriety be published; and this is ridiculous. Hence the victory of justice is comically presented as a movement from the ridiculousness of public folly to the ridiculousness of the publication of the essentially private, of the improper utterance of things which everyone privately enjoys because they are by nature enjoyable.” Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism*, p. 111.
can be potentially hazardous to the community.\textsuperscript{57} The Socrates of the \textit{Clouds} had no family, required precious little sustenance, and had no need of the rules and laws that regulate political communities. His think tank is a perfect community of thinkers, united and sustained by nothing more than a common and unfailing desire to know. He is thus perfectly free to inquire into the nature of all beings, and his intellectual pursuits know no boundaries or limits. Kierkegaard, whose reading and understanding of Aristophanes is in many ways without peer, gives us a powerful tool for understanding this aspect of Socrates’ manner:

That this is a superb description of the purely negative dialectic that continually remains in itself, never goes out into the qualifications of life or of the idea, and therefore does indeed rejoice in a freedom that scorns the chains that continuity lays on, the dialectic that is a power only in the most abstract sense, a king without a country who delights in the sheer possibility of renouncing everything in the moment of specious possession of everything, although the possession as well as the renunciation is illusory, a dialectic that is not embarrassed by the past, is not inclosed by its ironbound consequences, is not uneasy about the future because it so quickly forgets that even the future is practically forgotten before it is experienced, a dialectic that regrets nothing, desires nothing, is unto itself enough and leaps over everything as recklessly and casually as a straying child – this, I am sure, no one will deny.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57}For Nussbaum, the uniqueness of Aristophanes’ Socrates is found in his “personal courage and magnetism,” as well as his “elenctic questioning.” I agree with her that this is probably true, but it is not sufficient. All of these characteristics seem to point toward Socrates’ basic nature, or psychology, if you will. His courage to use his famous “method” to transcend the norms of convention must point toward something that is decisive about him other than his mere eccentricities. And even if, following her reading, it is due to his distinctively moral-political orientation, one would still have to explain why it is that his philosophizing takes such a radically apolitical or anti-political stance. This seems to be the very point of the caricature, and can be explained only with reference to the basic indifference that Socrates felt toward his city and its laws. Cf. Nussbaum, p. 79.

\textsuperscript{58}Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Irony}, pp. 135-136.
As a comic poet, Aristophanes shares to a great extent in this freedom, but there is an important difference between the two. Aristophanes recognizes Socrates’ way of life and the radical freedom upon which it is based. He seems to understand Socrates, and why it is that Socrates is largely unconcerned with the things that concern most human beings. To some extent it is because Aristophanes shares in this freedom that he can assess Socrates’ motivations without moralizing about them; in a way the comic poet also philosophizes, for he too looks upon the conventions of the city from the perspective of nature:

When Aristophanes, speaking on behalf of poetry and especially comic poetry, proclaims his superiority in wisdom, he does so without any trace of moralism: for he accepts and shares the philosopher’s longing for independence from the opinions of the city. He in fact succeeds where the philosophers fail. He does so because he knows the limitations of authentic human independence.59

But Aristophanes is no Socrates; his burlesque of Socrates makes it clear that his critical stance does not culminate in indifference, and hence, that freedom is no excuse for imprudence.60 We could only confuse his perspective with that of the city in the beginning because his recognition that Socrates’ radical self-sufficiency is untenable leads to what is ultimately the same position as that of the city. Underlying Aristophanes’ comedy is an understanding of man as in need of


60 As we noted earlier, comedy presupposes seriousness as a condition of its existence. Aristophanes’ comedy has shown itself to be the perfect comedy, for it understands both the distance required from that seriousness in order to be funny, as well as the essential role that this seriousness plays in comedy, if not all of poetry. In this way, Aristophanes shows himself to be the perfect comic, while Socrates is shown to be perfectly comic.
family and city, as a being requiring grounding and law. Man is both body and soul, and in so far as that body always finds itself always within a particular setting, he remains always a particular being. Those things that appear ephemeral from the perspective of philosophy are no less important than philosophy itself; if anything, their importance is to be found in the fact that they are a constant and necessary aspect of man’s nature. Socrates’ way of life is an illusion, for it pretends toward self-sufficiency when in reality it ignores if not misunderstands the very important demands the body makes on man. Precisely because he does not concern himself with the human things, he finds himself to be at their whims. Socrates’ irresponsible imprudence made him susceptible to the dangers inherent in Strepsiades’ criminal scheme. It should not surprise us when the concluding scenes of the Clouds show the utter destruction of Socrates’ think tank, an event made comic because Socrates himself could not have seen it coming.

**Conclusion: the Socrates of the Clouds**

Our reading of the Clouds has uncovered a complex picture of Socrates, one that is mixed with a great deal of intrigue, if not also a bit of envy. At first glance, one is tempted to say that

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61 Mary Nichols says of Socrates’ incomplete self-sufficiency that, “The incident indicates both that Socrates acts as if he were free of his bodily needs and that he is not as independent of his body as he would like to be. Philosophy cannot free men from the demands of their bodies.” Nichols, p. 12.

62 Clouds, 1464-1512.

Socrates is a problem because he is subversive – a threat to the political community through making the weaker speech the stronger and corrupting the youth.\textsuperscript{64} We have seen, however, that Aristophanes’ portrait of Socrates is not simply that of a sophist–philosopher. He is not, as Nietzsche would have him be, the first and supreme sophist. Socrates is more than this, he represents something distinctive and intriguing, enough so that he alone became the subject of an amazingly insightful parody. What makes Socrates unique is his radical detachment from the everydayness of life. For one reason or another, and here Aristophanes’ silence remains a mystery, Socrates felt no bond with his fellow countrymen; he is somehow without that key attachment that normally binds one to one’s own, whether that be family or country.\textsuperscript{65} We are left with a portrait of Socrates that is ridiculous because it is too far removed from the vantage point of the citizen, and as such, we are inclined to laugh at that which we cannot comprehend; “Viewed in the perspective of the nonphilosophers the philosopher is necessarily ridiculous, and

\textsuperscript{64}If this were true, then the \textit{Clouds} would have been written as an attack on Socrates. But as we shall see, the similarities between Aristophanes and Socrates suggest that the writing of the \textit{Clouds} may have a very different intention.

\textsuperscript{65}What Kierkegaard says of Socrates on this point is insightful; “that Socrates in actual life presented many comic sides, that he, to put it bluntly once and for all, was to a certain degree eccentric cannot be denied; neither can it be denied that this is enough justification for a comic poet; but there is no denying, either, that this would not have been enough for an Aristophanes.” Kierkegaard, \textit{The Concept of Irony}, pp. 128-129. Kierkegaard is right that Socrates must have surely appeared “eccentric” to his fellow citizens, but that this eccentricity could not be enough to have warranted a burlesque. This oddity of Socrates, perceivable by all, must point toward something else, something more primary from which this eccentricity would be but one emanation.
viewed in the perspective of the philosopher the nonphilosophers are necessarily ridiculous; the meeting of the philosophers and nonphilosophers is the natural theme of comedy.”

One is tempted to say that because the Clouds is offered from the perspective of the comic poet instead of that of the city, and because there is as much similarity between Aristophanes and Socrates as there is between the former and the city, it is altogether possible, if not probable, that the burlesque was not meant to be an attack as such. Aristophanes shows the problem of Socrates emerging from a setting that could easily be substituted for one of countless other possibilities. Socrates does threaten the foundations of a community, but he is only a problem when he is sought out, i.e., when his theoretical wisdom is coveted for practical concerns. By letting Socrates’ imprudence emerge as a problem because Strepsiades seeks him out for nefarious reasons, Aristophanes shows us that his Clouds can just as easily be understood as a warning than as an attack:

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67 Nichols suggest that the Clouds was meant as an attack on Socrates, one that, “. . . directs man to ordinary life as a substitute for completion, but it is in ordinary life that the desire for completeness arises. How long can laughter check desire and prevent tears?” (Nichols, p. 28). The comedy, for Nichols, is in some sense tragic, for it can point out the inherent flaws of the situation, yet can offer no serious solution. While it is true that Aristophanes’ comedy comes back down to the horizons of the city in a way that Socrates’ philosophy never does, it does not necessarily follow that the comedy is purely one-sided and adversarial. Precisely because of the degree to which Aristophanes, like Socrates, is at a great distance from the city testifies to the likelihood that the comedy is also an attack on the city. And if this is the case, for whom would the attack have been authored if not for Socrates? Without presenting the city and Socrates as each being both serious and foolish, Aristophanes’ comedy would show itself to be incomplete, and hence, ridiculous.
Far from being an enemy of Socrates, Aristophanes was his friend, but somewhat envious of his wisdom – even of the wisdom of the young Socrates. Or, as one might also say, the primary object of the comic poet’s envy was not Socrates’ wisdom but his sovereign contempt for that popular applause on which the dramatic poet necessarily depends, or Socrates’ perfect freedom. 68

And if the Clouds serves as a warning, it is one that has two components. 69

On the one hand, Socrates’ indifference is linked to his imprudence because it makes him vulnerable. He is a threat to the political community because he can be exploited by those who seek to use him for ill-gotten gains. Had Strepsiades managed his domestic affairs better, he would never have been saddled with the constraints his imprudence placed on him, and thus would never have gone to the think tank in the first place. Socrates’ indifference to Strepsiades’ motivations for entering the think tank suggests that, in practice, his wisdom simply becomes a tool of any who would attempt to manipulate the law for the sake of injustice. Nussbaum illustrates this point nicely when she says:

Aristophanes’ portrait ignores the good intentions while portraying the success of the elenctic attack on nomos. This, the play claims, is what Socrates really succeeds in teaching; this is how

68 Strauss, Socrates and Aristophanes., p. 5.

69 If this reading is correct, then Aristophanes stands in relation to Socrates just as Nietzsche sees Euripides in relation to his audience. Euripides’ failings, failings that were the consequence of his relationship with Socrates, are, according to Nietzsche, ultimately the result of making the spectator into the moral judge. It is in reaction to this egalitarian tendency of the tragedian that Nietzsche asks, “And if, by virtue of his endowments and aspirations, he should feel himself superior to every one of these spectators, how could he feel greater respect for the collective expression of all these subordinate capacities than for the relatively highest—endowed individual spectator?” (The Birth of Tragedy, p. 79). But if Aristophanes does not see Socrates as the quintessential sophist, is not Socrates’ relationship with Euripides, at least from Aristophanes’ perspective, made unclear? And if this is the case, would not Nietzsche’s question be asked better of Aristophanes himself?
a pupil really sees and interprets Socratic teaching – especially a pupil of the sort he would
carelessly pick, a man more dedicated to pleasure than to virtue. Even a much more substantially
elaborated moral position could be misinterpreted; but it seems correct that the peculiarities of
Socrates’ own teaching make it particularly susceptible to abuse.⁷⁰

By helping Strepsiades’ short-sighted self-interest, Socrates actually undermines both the
stability of the traditional family and the laws of the city, and hence, presents himself as a
political problem. The city is simply not wise enough to understand who and what Socrates is,
and because of this, he is particularly at risk to those who would seek him for the wrong reasons.
In this respect, Aristophanes seems to be warning Socrates of the implications of his indifference;
his failure to take note of his setting is both imprudent and dangerous.

Socrates is imprudent because he fails to see the “political” character of philosophy, and
hence, he is unable to stave off the destruction of his think tank. Even if Socrates represents the
complete and unadulterated life of the mind in principle, Aristophanes shows us that alone this
life is incomplete. The perfectly complete philosopher, he who is dedicated without reservation
to the purely theoretical, is neither perfect nor a complete philosopher:

Aristophanes has not viewed this nothing as the ironic freedom in which Socrates indulged but
has viewed it in such a way that he always merely shows its implicit emptiness. Therefore,
instead of the eternal fullness of the idea, Socrates attains the most ascetic scantiness in a self-
immersion that never brings up anything from the depths, an immersion that, even if it goes down
into the underworld of the soul . . . always comes back – empty-handed.⁷¹

Someone who cannot understand both his body and soul, and with that the necessary attachment
to both family and city, cannot be the pinnacle of human existence; a philosopher who cannot

⁷⁰Nussbaum, p. 86.

give an adequate account of himself and his activities is certainly not complete, and hence, is not self-sufficient. It is not enough that Socrates is merely interested in human things in the same way he is interested in fleas and gnats. He must understand the importance of these things, such as justice or the love of families, an understanding that begins not through an investigation, but through an experience of the things themselves.

Moreover, Socrates is irresponsible because he refuses to concern himself with the damage his instruction might do to the community. The city is not composed of a population of philosophers. It is, instead, a community of citizens, linked together by a host of shared opinions and familial relations, not by a unity of knowledge and congruent thought. Strepsiades is willing to undermine the laws of the city because of his attachments to his family, a calculation that shows men love their own first and foremost. Yet this love can get men into trouble if it is taken to its logical conclusion, for the well-being of the family cannot exist apart from that of the city, no matter how incongruent their ends may be. Socrates’ failure to recognize the great distance that separates his wisdom from the common opinions that rule the city illustrates his irresponsibility, a fault made all the worse because of his supposed wisdom. Socrates became a pawn in a conflict that threatened the delicate balance between the family and the city, yet he was either unaware or did not care that his wisdom might be used for ill. The city is, in a word, ignorant; there is a radical distinction to be made between a community composed of citizens and
Socrates’ inability to see this distinction not only testifies to his imprudence, but also establishes the foundations of his irresponsibility. He fails as a complete philosopher because he can neither protect the city from his philosophy, nor himself from the city:

The kind of wisdom that exhausts itself in the self-forgotten study of the things aloft and in its corollaries is unable to protect itself against its enemies because it is unable to act on the city or to humanize it by counteracting the waspishness of the city, and it is unable to do this because it

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72 Aristophanes himself recognizes the difference between the few who know and the many who do not. During the parabasis (518-562), Aristophanes actually speaks to the audience (and readers) in his own name, and does so to chide it for not recognizing the Clouds as the wisest of his plays, and for not awarding it first place upon its first and only performance (cf. Dover, p. 104.). This insertion, which could only have been placed there after the play was first performed, demonstrates Aristophanes’ own discontent with the wisdom of the many. Because there is no evidence the play was ever performed again with the addition of his own voice into the plot, we are forced to wonder if Aristophanes’ failure on stage did not teach him the lesson his Socrates will be taught in print. To this point, Xavier Riu suggests, “Thus, Aristophanes and Socrates are both displayed as unfairly treated by people who cannot live up to their respective sophiai. I repeat that this play is contrary to all the rest of his extant production (perhaps in accordance with its peculiar, i.e., written diffusion), and if his aim in revising the play was to reprove the original audience for not having appreciated the first version, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that he intended to achieve this by drawing a parallel between himself and, this time, unusually, not the hero but the villain of his play. Thus, he might have wanted to vindicate himself with this revision by showing in all its ugliness the dark face of the uneducated people, who did not appreciate his comedy – and then we must necessarily conclude that he wants to vindicate Socrates as well; he would, then, compose a sort of comic transposition of his defeat.” (Xavier Riu, Dionysism and Comedy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), p. 270). While it is undoubtedly true that Aristophanes recognizes a great kinship between himself and Socrates, this does not mean that his purpose in writing the Clouds was to vindicate himself and Socrates against the opinions of the uneducated audience. Why then would he have written about Socrates at all? It is Aristophanes who is the first to level a criticism against Socrates, and thus using a caricature of Socrates to vindicate the historical Socrates before there is anything to be vindicated is anachronistic indeed. More likely the Clouds serves to warn Socrates of what the comic learned the hard way – the implications of the wise living amongst the ignorant.
does not in the first place recognize the necessity of that waspishness; the poet, however, whether comic or tragic, can protect himself against persecution.73

It is safe to say that the first step toward responsible citizenship for this philosopher lies in how Socrates must choose his students.

On the other hand, the Clouds also serves as a warning to the city itself.74 The problems that Strepsiades faces are not unique to him alone. His burdens could be those of anyone at any time; the prospects of facing financial ruin because of fiscal irresponsibility are a timeless political phenomena, one not unique to an ancient Greek farmer. And the problem of Socrates is a timeless political problem in so far as it relates to how the city comes to terms with the free inquiry that occurs within its walls. When philosophy and politics are mixed, as they are in the Clouds, we see how the very fabric of the community is threatened by the irresponsibility of each. As a warning, then, the Clouds seems to recommend a rather skeptical attitude toward philosophy, especially as it concerns the education of the city’s youth. The city must take better measures to contain philosophy, either by reminding it of its political orientation, and hence asking it to remember its political obligations, or by exiling it and reinforcing its more traditional education. Given what we have seen transpire in the Clouds, especially the ease with

73Strauss, Socrates and Aristophanes, p. 311.

74One is reminded again of the rather ominous language that Aristophanes employs during the first parabasis when he speaks to the audience itself. If this part was written after the initial production, then it, read in conjunction with the outcome of the play, serves as bookend warnings for Strepsiades’ experience with Socrates.
which Just speech was defeated by Unjust speech, the latter option does not seem to offer great promise. By keeping it in mind as a possibility, however, we are in a position to understand better Aristophanes’ warning to Socrates, as well as his political prescriptions.

The city as such does not need Socrates or his philosophy as such. It will continue to exist without it, much as societies that have never experienced the flourishing of philosophy are forced to do. But because Just speech is in need of support, Aristophanes does not eschew philosophy. Quite the opposite, he seems to support it, so long as it remembers who and what it is, which includes where it is and what it must presuppose before it can prosper.75 Aristophanes’ warning to the city is thus similar to his warning to Socrates: be mindful of who you are and what you seek, and be aware that by attempting to escape the ever-present problems of everyday life you are not seduced into those means that will ultimately be your undoing.

Our exploration of the Clouds with a view to the problem of Socrates has thus come full circle. The problem of Socrates is that he is a problem; his very existence threatens the fabric

75One might even go so far as to say that Aristophanes’ warning to Socrates might include a request to come to the aid of justice. Such a request would serve the purposes of both curbing Socrates’ behavior and defending justice as only he could. Moreover, it might give some additional insight into the “Socratic turn” mentioned earlier. Socrates’ turn to moral and political things was initiated by a search for a foundation, by the need to justify philosophy as a way of life as opposed to a doctrine, dogma, or even a commitment to reason. To do this requires addressing with the utmost seriousness the greatest challenge to philosophy as a way of life. It is for this reason that Socrates turns to the city, for it is on the level of the city that man is presented with alternative views of the good life. But more importantly, it is also at the level of the city and its opinions that one has access to that source out of which springs forth the justification of the city. It is no accident that Aristophanes speaks in his own name when veiled as a Cloud, for it is the Clouds who themselves seek to be like the gods.
that makes his existence possible. The danger he poses politically stems from his radical freedom from those things associated with man’s worldly and temporal existence—his body, his family, and his city—a freedom that translates into a practical indifference to the city and its foundations. The stability of the family, the education of the young, justice, and even the sanctity of the city’s myths are threatened by Socrates, even if the indifferent philosopher harbors no ill-will. It is precisely Socrates’ freedom and indifference that also make him an enigma. For just as his radical freedom puts him at odds with the city, so too does it give us an understanding of what constituted the essence of the historical Socrates. This essence was the aspect of the problem of Socrates that initiated our quest in the beginning. We lacked access to Socrates, and turned to the *Clouds* with the hope that we might better understand this silent sphinx. Given what we have learned, we now are in possession of an important clue that will help us to explain why it is that Socrates failed or chose not to write.

Aristophanes’ caricature suggests that Socrates did not write because he was not inclined to do so, or to put this more succinctly, because he failed to see it as relevant to his mode of inquiry. To write suggests that one wishes to convey one’s thoughts to another, primarily if not essentially for the benefit of the one who will read what is written. To do so, however, suggests an obligation, however slight or unintentional, to an other, one with whom you share a tie or bond. Socrates would not have felt this obligation or bond, as he felt no obligation or bond. He

76 This suggests that one does not write for the simple pleasure of writing, much in the manner and style of a poet. I acknowledge this reason for writing as a general possibility, but not
was a teacher only in an accidental sense; his students gained from their experiences with
Socrates’ experiments and inquiries, not from his lectures or writings. His indifference to the city
and even to the well-being of his students accentuates his radical freedom, and it is on account of
this that we are entitled to surmise that he did not write because he felt it irrelevant or onerous
from the point of view of philosophy.\footnote{One might object to this by saying the Socrates refused to write precisely because of his famous “doctrine” of learned ignorance. This could be true, but Aristophanes gives us no indication that Socrates held such a view, nor is it necessarily true that one would not write because they have failed to answer the fundamental questions of existence in a completely satisfactory way. Being aware of one’s ignorance is not the same as being ignorant, and it is conceivable that one could write about not only the difference between the two, but also about how one can move from one state to the other.}

Those who see in Socrates a model for citizenship would thus do well to look first to
Aristophanes. Indifference is not moderate alienation, and to confuse the two is to mistake what
is essential to politics with what is not. A city of Socrates is no city at all, and a failure to
recognize why this is the case is to forget why philosophy and the city are in conflict. From this
one can see why Aristophanes would have both respected and found fault with Socrates. To be
above conventional opinion is noble indeed, even for a comic poet, but to be so far above
conventional opinion that you are no longer seen as relevant is to invite suspicion, if not
contempt. Socrates’ radical freedom is thus not human, if by human we mean the connectedness

\footnote{One might object to this by saying the Socrates refused to write precisely because of his famous “doctrine” of learned ignorance. This could be true, but Aristophanes gives us no indication that Socrates held such a view, nor is it necessarily true that one would not write because they have failed to answer the fundamental questions of existence in a completely satisfactory way. Being aware of one’s ignorance is not the same as being ignorant, and it is conceivable that one could write about not only the difference between the two, but also about how one can move from one state to the other.}
that human beings thrive upon and which usually accompanies any sensible definition of happiness. Socrates, then, did not write because he was indifferent to writing in the same way that he was indifferent to almost every other human activity, and it is this radical departure from all things human that Aristophanes finds to be his greatest fault:

Socratic wisdom can be shown to be ridiculous with impunity through its failure to be armed with a publicly effective rhetoric, which either has a public forum already assigned it (as comedy has) or can come out in public through writing. The weakness of Socratic wisdom is due, on the one hand, to its essential unpublishability and, on the other, to the appearance of a foreign growth that any writing of a Socratic stamp would have. If the Socrates of the Gorgias is the standard, who denies that it is just to retaliate, then any written attack that heaps up ridicule on anyone who ever made fun of Socrates must seem to violate the spirit of Socrates, unless one says that denunciation of one’s friends is allowed if it leads to their improvement by way of punishment (Gorgias 480b7-d6). Such a concession, however, might also let Aristophanes off the hook if his comedy could be construed as a warning about the culpable weakness of Socrates. No private warning could be as effective since Socrates’ weakness must be exposed to the glare of the city in order for it to be seen as a weakness.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{78}Seth Benardete, The Tragedy and Comedy of Life, p. 205
Chapter 3: Socrates’ Apology

What am I worthy to suffer or to pay because I did not keep quiet during my life and did not care for the things that the many do – moneymaking and household management, and generalships, and popular oratory, and the other offices, and conspiracies and factions that come to be in the city – since I held that I myself was really too decent to survive if I went into these things? I did not go into matters where, if I did go, I was going to be of no benefit either to you or to myself; instead, I went to each of you privately to perform the greatest benefaction, as I affirm, and I attempted to persuade each of you not to care for any of his own things until he cares for himself, how he will be the best and most prudent possible, nor to care for the other things in the same way.

Apology of Socrates, 36b4 - 36c8

If we were to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche, we might say of Socrates that he was Apollonian, one who elevated himself out of or in contrast to the many. His life was lived at a distance from others, seeking only what he needed to fulfill his yearnings. This elevation of his life over those of his peers is essentially controversial, for incessant curiosity will draw attention, and attention, when mixed with suspicion, will upset the status quo. For Socrates, philosophy was a personal endeavor, a calling that challenged him to explore and give an account of both himself and his surroundings, but which nevertheless involved the participation of others with whom his existence was shared. Yet this task, this call of philosophy, can be solipsistic in its approach; viewing the world from the prism of the inquiring mind gives the impression that the mind and its curiosity are what matters most. Even though he was surrounded constantly by friend and foe alike, one gets the sense that Socrates’ comportment with his fellow citizens was instrumental, owing less to genuine human gregariousness then to his own eccentric

inquisitiveness. Socrates’ was a life of the mind, so much so that his pursuit of wisdom often involved the neglect of those things that attend naturally to the body. It is with a view to this oddity of Socrates’ personality that Aristophanes’ sketches his caricature, bringing to light a figure so free from the norm that one cannot help but to wonder if something is missing.

Without being too simplistic, one can say that Aristophanes finds fault with Socrates for not being conventional enough. Socrates is hardly the best citizen in Athens; citizens live in cities, whereas we found Socrates in a think-tank, a place removed from civic concern. An indictment like this is strange coming from a comic poet, but it nevertheless goes to the core of the issue. Socratic citizenship is problematic because Socratic philosophy is problematic; the political implications of his philosophizing are far from salutary. Once we admit this, however, we must qualify it immediately, for its implications strike us as being nonsensical. How could a man as radically indifferent as Aristophanes’ portrait suggests have inspired men such as Plato, for whom the idea of Socrates figures most prominently? It would be strange indeed if the chief protagonist of the Platonic corpus, the one known for his vibrant speeches about virtue and wisdom, was modeled on a cold and dispassionate man. There must be more to the story; is Socrates not typically thought of as an erotic philosopher, an image we get from none other than his most prominent student? Plato gives us his *Apology of Socrates* so that Socrates might account for his way of life, and in doing so, fill out the picture of his comportment with his fellow man.
Before immersing ourselves in the dense thicket of the text, let us set the stage for Socrates’ defense speech first by making one of our own that might help to balance our approach and moderate what is already a rather critical stance toward Socrates. As it now stands, we have said, in essence, that it is Aristophanes, not Socrates, who is the better philosopher. Aristophanes seeks to teach Socrates what he as a comic poet already knows: namely, how to get along peaceably, if not amiable, with others by justifying his own way of life. Aristophanes has seen or understands in principle what Socrates sees; albeit to different degrees both have philosophized in a manner that leads them away from their city. The introspection necessitated by comedy has made Aristophanes the better philosopher, however, for he alone sees the groundlessness of unmitigated and unadulterated speculation. It is precisely comedy that sees the importance of the body, for comedy is that art which so often makes us laugh by accentuating

While his ultimate conclusion differs from our own, Dover makes an observation similar in spirit when he says, “It is difficult for the modern reader to understand how a writer as sensitive and subtle as Aristophanes could have taken the field with such vigour on the side of the philistines against that spirit of systematic, rational inquiry which we regard as an essential ingredient of civilization. Perhaps we underrate the extent to which aesthetic sensibility and devotion to the perfecting of artistic technique can be divorced from abstract or scientific reasoning. It is possible that in many of the greatest Greek artist and poets (Pindar, for example) the divorce was complete and in the comic poets a predilection for artistic creativity rather than systematic analysis naturally have been reinforced by a temperamental inclination to mock what is new and difficult from the standpoint of the man in the street . . . Aristophanes at least had more excuse; exciting though some Greek philosophical and scientific speculations now seem to have been, viewed as an early stage in the intellectual history of Europe, they were not always expressed in a way which would necessarily make them appear, even to a rational man, more plausible than Hesiodic myths.” K. J. Dover, Aristophanic Comedy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 113-114.
openly the needs of the body. The comic poet is thus superior because he alone has seen the
worth of both man’s particular settings and the appeal of universal knowledge. Poetry stands to
philosophy as a father does to his son; the youthful naivete of speculation gives way to the
concerns of practical life. If Socrates’ freedom is at all a choice, it is one that must be understood
prudently and embraced judiciously.

One is forced to ask, however, if Aristophanes has done justice not only to Socrates, but
to philosophy itself? Is it sufficient for a comic poet to say to a philosopher: For you to be
truly philosophical, you must do justice to your surroundings. Surely you aspire to knowledge
that is more than the prevailing opinions of your time and place, but be careful of such
aspirations. They are dangerous, not only to yourself and your true fulfilment, but also to your
fellow men with whom you share your existence. You seek the wonders of the mind to the
exclusion of the body, but to what end? Is your wisdom not ridiculous if it fails to account for
the needs of both body and soul? And to the extent that you abstract from the body, you lose a
very great truth that connects your fellow citizens together in families and cities. They cannot
philosophize, and upsetting their understanding of the world will do neither them nor you any
good. Is not such rhetoric mere parochialism, words uttered to the talented by those who cannot
truly understand?

If Socrates were to respond to such a criticism, what would he say? Would he come to
the defense of philosophy by attempting to refute the provincial opinions of a poet? Could we
not imagine Socrates saying something like this: Aristophanes, surely you jest when you say that you too philosophize. How could it be that someone who has seen the beauty that lies beyond the ugliness of everyday life return readily to that ugliness. Who but an imposter would exhort those capable of living a pure life to embrace the harshness and contingencies accompanying normal life? You say that I do not understand men, nor myself, because I do not understand their particular existence, that they do not spring forth from rocks or stone but from mothers and fathers. But I do understand this, I understand that men have bodies and those bodies make very great claims on them. I understand this all too well. I understand that it is what keeps man from truly fulfilling himself. So well do I understand them that I know anyone who concerns himself with the truth can ill-afford to dwell amongst them. Their perspective is circumscribed by the body, and hence, by necessity, and as such, is no place for those who seek to transcend necessity, to walk in the light. While the men you admire wallow in their daily lives, being separated from the beasts only by their superior use of force and clever manipulation of art, I pursue the noble things, those things not tinged with the petty interests or base motivations of the body. Laughter is the defense employed by those that have no defense, the means of discrediting by mockery what cannot be discredited by speech. No Aristophanes, I am not foolish, I understand your warning more clearly than you do. The family and the city are the home of the poet, not the philosopher.
Is such a response not what we would expect of Socrates? The master of speeches and inquirer into all things should no more fear than laugh at Aristophanes’ criticisms. Is Aristophanes’ warning not discredited, shown to be nothing more than the illusions of an anti-intellectual intellectual; the non-philosophical philosopher? This would undoubtedly be true if Socrates’ defense speech were to be offered from the perspective of a detached philosophy that refused to concede the necessity of the body and thus of families, cities, and gods. But this is not the Socrates of Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, and the difference between the two is decisive. The Socrates of the *Apology* appears to be the furthest thing from the inhumane aesthete suspended in a basket. Plato’s Socrates is urbane and genteel; he has manners and style the likes of which come only from associating with other men. He will not answer the criticisms of Aristophanes on the comic poet’s terms, but instead on his own, suggesting that his philosophizing is not so distant from the city as the *Clouds* would have us believe. Aristophanes mistook freedom for piety, and hence assumed an indifference when in reality there was deference. One cannot be indifferent and imprudent if one’s whole life is lived in the service of others. Thus, it is Socrates’ defense speech, his response to this criticism of freedom and distance, to which we now turn.

**Setting the Stage**

The *Apology* is what it says it is, i.e., Socrates’ defense speech. But it is also much more. It is a drama, a play of sorts, something very much akin to what would transpire on stage with all the accompanying characters and settings. Socrates’ defense speech has an element of theater in
it, one that we must be sure to keep in mind. The theatrical nature of the *Apology* is further accentuated by its style; it has the form of a performed rather than a narrated play. All Platonic dialogues fall into one of two classes: they are either performed, whereby the reader himself is brought into the action of the play indirectly by becoming a passive participant, or they are narrated, where the reader becomes an active participant in the dialogue through his interaction with the narrator who recalls the action. As a performed drama, the *Apology* engages the reader by making him part of the audience, just as if he were sitting with those who will be Socrates’ judges. This is no mistake on the part of the *Apology*, for it makes the reader at the same time attentive to both the speeches of Socrates and the drama’s action. The *Apology* is very much like the *Clouds*, as both force the reader to look at Socrates and his speeches, as well as the inner action of the play. The reader must evaluate the content of the dialogue as well as its outcome. While Plato’s Socrates will not respond to Aristophanes in a manner akin to the philosophizing that transpires in the *Clouds*, his account of himself will nevertheless be in a dramatic manner very similar to that of the comedy’s.

By drawing attention to the action of the drama in addition to its speeches, the *Apology* points us toward something important, something that serves as the beginning of our examination. The action of the *Apology* is dictated in the sense that it is demanded. Socrates is

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3I am grateful to Leo Strauss for pointing out the distinction between narrated and performed action. For a further elaboration, one should consult Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 153.
forced to give an account of himself by the city; they have called him before their tribunal to answer the charges brought against him formally. The framework of the Apology is thus compulsory; Socrates’ participation in this drama is not a matter of choice. But is this of consequence? If nothing else, it forces us to measure Socrates’ arguments against his situation, asking constantly if there is any relation between what he has said and the situation in and because of which he has spoken. By situating Socrates’ answer to the charge of radical freedom and imprudence within a setting of compulsion, one cannot help but notice that Socrates’ defense speech, at the level of form and without reference to substance, is from the beginning ironic.

**Introduction: The Public Accusations of the First Accusers**

It is no great stretch to construct a dialogue between Aristophanes and Socrates. The Apology mirrors the Clouds as a performed drama, and it matches the archetypal comedy with the archetype of irony. If this is true, however, we face serious interpretive problems. The Clouds had at least two substantive layers in its presentation; it leveled both public and private criticisms such that the former ultimately pointed toward the latter, i.e., that the comic charges of atheism and sophistry pointed toward the serious charge of indifference. If the Apology mirrors the Clouds in the ways suggested, Socrates’ speech should follow the same trajectory of public

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4Hear what Alexander Nehamas says about the emergence of irony as a literary device; “The history of the word is relatively well known. Originally terms of abuse, *eironeia* and its derivatives, which first appear in the works of Aristophanes, carried the sense of dissembling, shamming, and deceiving. The same sense is sometimes found in Plato, and in a form slightly more complex than that of its original Aristophanic uses it survives as late as Demosthenes.” Alexander Nehamas, The Art of Living (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 50.
and private as had Aristophanes’ play. The *Apology* should answer the public criticisms publically, but in such a way that the response to the private warning comes to light. This means, then, that our interpretation of the *Apology* must have two parts: we must first listen to Socrates’ public defense with a view to the public criticisms of the *Clouds*, only next to engage again that defense critically with a view to determining his private defense.

Socrates opens the *Apology* by referring to a “first” set of accusers, those who have long spoken ill of him and his way of life; “For many have accused me to you, even long ago, talking now for many years and saying nothing true; and I fear them more than Anytus and those around him, although they too are dangerous. But the others are more dangerous, men.”5 According to Socrates, these accusers have been around for many years, and have spread untruths about him for so long that the more youthful citizens of the jury have lived their entire lives hearing and believing nothing but these untruths. These accusers come from many corners, too many to know or to name, except of course the most prominent and important among them, who “. . . happens to be a comic poet.”6 These accusations and this poet we know, because as Socrates tells us, “. . . you yourselves also used to see these things in the comedy of Aristophanes: a

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6Ibid., 18d 2.
certain Socrates was carried around there, claiming that he was treading on air and spouting much other drivel about which I have no expertise, either much or little.”

That Socrates has Aristophanes in mind here is clear. Their correspondence is made even more apparent through the manner of Socrates’ speech, which addresses rather immediately each of Aristophanes’ public or comic criticisms. Socrates lists the accusations, telling us that they speak of “... a certain Socrates, a wise man, a thinker on the things aloft, who has investigated the things under the earth, and who makes the weaker speech the stronger.” Moreover, “Socrates does injustice and is meddlesome, by investigating the things under the earth and the heavenly things, and by making the weaker speech the stronger, and by teaching others these same things.” It is easy to see the congruity with the Clouds. There Socrates was introduced as a natural philosopher, one preoccupied with the nature of the material universe, as well as a teacher of cleverly precise speech. The Socrates of the Apology recalls that story, evoking memories of anecdotes surrounding the ridiculous investigations in the think-tank.

And how does he refute the charges? Socrates addressed the last charge first, explaining that although he does not frown upon having rhetorical knowledge as such, he simply has never

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7Ibid., 19c 2-6.

8Ibid., 18b 7 - 18c 1.

9Ibid., 19b 5 - 19c 2. It should be noted that Socrates’ very next line, that the sworn statement “is something like this,” suggests that what he is charged with and what he is defending himself against are not exactly the same.
made its pursuit his object. He cannot teach how to make the weaker speech the stronger, not only because he himself has no knowledge of it, but because he does not teach at all. He is not like Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Ceos, Hippias of Elis, or Evenus of Paros, those fine men who make their livelihoods by teaching and educating young men. While such a thing “... seems to me to be noble, if one should be able to educate human beings,” Socrates, for his part, “... would be pluming and priding myself on it if I had knowledge of these things. But I do not have knowledge of them, men of Athens.”

Socrates is aware of his own inadequacies to such a degree that he knows he does not know, and hence, would not presume to teach. Socrates does not corrupt the youth, not even indirectly. He is not the man to whom one such as Strepsiades would turn. Aristophanes’ first public criticism of imprudence does not hold because Socrates has nothing to teach, and as such, can hardly be thought of as a teacher. One does not have to be mindful of the motivations of one’s students when one has no students nor anything to impart.

\[\text{Ibid., 19c 6-8.}\]

\[\text{Ibid., 19e1-2 & 20c1-3.}\]

\[\text{Note that Socrates explicitly says he does not take money to educate (19d8-9). As we shall see in a moment, just because he neither has anything to teach nor takes any money for teaching does not mean he is not a teacher of some sort. The charge of imprudence stands on the meaning of this nuance.}\]
But if Socrates did not have, or did not pretend to have, knowledge of rhetoric, and did not teach this sophistry to the young, from where have these allegations against him arisen? In other words, why is there so much smoke if there is no fire? Aristophanes caricature was imprudent because his rhetorical teaching, to which he granted open accesses, assumed that there were no gods, only the motion of bodies. To augment his response to the charge of imprudence, Socrates further maintains that he has, if anything, not divine but human wisdom. This human wisdom, in distinction to divine wisdom, can not serve as a basis for the imprudence displayed in the Clouds; there is nothing absurd in Socrates’ quest for knowledge. Instead of searching out the knowable roots of the whole, Socrates is contented, to the degree that he possesses it, with what little of human things he can know; “that which is perhaps human wisdom; for perhaps I really am wise in this. But those of whom I just spoke might perhaps be wise in some wisdom greater than human, or else I cannot say what it is.” Not only is the Socrates of the Apology unlike the caricature present in the Clouds, he is its polar opposite. Instead of being imprudent and ridiculous, he is self-aware and measured; Socrates knows what he knows, and more importantly knows what he does not know, and at no time do his knowledge and actions resemble anything that could be thought of as a threat.

\[^{13}\text{Ibid., 20c4-5.}\]

\[^{14}\text{Ibid., 20d8-20e2.}\]
Yet Socrates is not off of the hook, so to speak, with the old accusers. To show that Aristophanes was far askew of his true intentions, Socrates must refute the charge of disbelief more directly. Further demonstrating the parallels between the *Clouds* and the *Apology*, Socrates attempts to justify himself and his way of life through one of the most memorable anecdotes preserved from antiquity. What Aristophanes mistakenly took to be atheism, which in turn formed the basis of his playful caricature, was in fact a most extreme form of piety. Socrates tells the jurors the story of the Delphic oracle, where his now deceased comrade Chaerephon went to the Pythia, the priestess of Apollo at Delphi, to ask if there was anyone wiser than Socrates.  

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Ibid., 20e10 - 21a7. This rather famous story of the Oracle is of the utmost importance for any study that seeks to understand both the historical and literary Socrates. It goes to the core of Socrates’ civic life, and to his famous turn to moral and political philosophy. Hear what Mario Montuori says about the Oracle’s importance; “Plato’s *Apology* has remained the basis of every possible Socratic reconstruction, not only when a search is made for the real Socrates, but even when resort is made to the memories of Xenophon or the witness of Aristotle or the adaptation and agreement of the sources with each other. And it has remained so because, as already said, the historic character of the oracle to Chaerephon gives to the *Apology* the value of an historical witness of the nature of Socrates’ personality. The problem as to whether the story of the oracle to Chaerephon was the ‘witness of an historic event’ has been easily solved, as, in fact, it has never been set.” Montuori goes on to say that, “The present inquiry, having covered for the first time all the elements considered to be pertinent to the problem of the oracle to Chaerephon and to all the related fields of study, has shown that contrary to what has long been believed, the Delphic pronouncement on the wisdom of Socrates is not historical evidence about his wisdom, understood either as awareness of his own ignorance, or as youthful interest in natural science, or as dialectical investigation of men. The pronouncement is not evidence either of Apollo’s sympathy, due to Socrates’ special devotion to him at his Delphic shrine, and even less of a central and decisive event in Socrates’ life, such as the change over or ‘conversion’ from physics to moral philosophy which the Delphic oracle would have caused or helped to cause. In short, the oracle to Chaerephon is not, in fact ‘one of the most important documents about Socrates’ philosophy and destiny’ and in no way evidence of an historical fact; it is purely and simply and invention by Plato, in other words, the first root of the myth, dear throughout the
The priestess’ response is simple: there is no man wiser than Socrates. Not being able to make out what such a statement could mean or reconcile it with his own ignorance, Socrates strikes out on his own in an attempt to understand better what the god could be saying:

> When I heard these things, I pondered them like this: “What ever is the god saying, and what riddle is he posing? For I am conscious that I am not at all wise, either much or little. So what ever is he saying when he claims that I am wisest? Surely he is not saying something false, at least; for that is not sanctioned for him.” And for a long time I was at a loss about what ever he was saying, but then very reluctantly I turned to something like the following investigation of it.\footnote{Apology, 21b2 - 9.}

This investigation led him to attempt to refute the oracle by examining all those thought wise.

But after successive experiences with the politicians, poets and craftsmen, Socrates can find no one who is wiser than he, thereby fulfilling the prophesy of Apollo:

> . . . it is probable, men, that really the god is wise, and that in this oracle he is saying that human wisdom is worth little or nothing. And he appears to say this of Socrates and to have made use of my name in order to make me a pattern, as if he would say, “That one of you, O human beings is wisest, who like Socrates, has become cognizant that in truth he is worth nothing with respect to wisdom.”\footnote{Ibid., 23a5 - 23b4.}

Socrates is not the public atheist the Clouds made him out to be; instead of being a threat to the community, Socrates is its greatest asset. He may even be a model for citizenship because he

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centuries, of the just man condemned.” Mario Montuori, Socrates: Physiology of a Myth (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1981), pp. 60 and 140. If Montuori is correct, and we will assume that he is, the question then becomes this: What function does the tale about the Oracle play in the life of the historical Socrates, as well as in the dramatic persona?
alone makes it his duty to know himself, a duty that cannot but serve as a beacon for other citizens.\footnote{In his addition to the Socratic citizenship debates, David Corey stresses these religious influences on Socrates’ civic and philosophical mission; “What we have found, then, is that the religious dimension of Socrates’ thought relates to Socratic citizenship in important ways. Socrates’ conduct as a citizen was neither ‘purely secular’ (if Socrates’ own accounts, mediated through Plato and Xenophon, can be believed) nor was it simply determined by reason (if by ‘reason’ one means the mere use of elenchus or the principle of non-contradiction). Rather, Socratic citizenship proves again and again to be shaped and conditioned by religious influences.” David Corey, “Socratic Citizenship,” \textit{Review of Politics}, Vol. 67, No.2 (Spring, 2005), pp. 226-227.}

Socrates’ response to the old accusers, and hence to the public criticisms of the \textit{Clouds}, is to emphasize his extreme devotion to the gods. It is the gods that call him to philosophize, albeit indirectly, and it is to this call that he has devoted himself completely. As he says of his divine calling, “. . . because of this occupation, I have had no leisure, either to do any of the things of the city worth speaking of or any of the things of my family. Instead, I am in ten-thousandfold poverty because of my devotion to the god.”\footnote{\textit{Apology}, 23b8 - 23c2.} And, in anticipation of the question of how, if all this is true, he came to acquire the reputation he now has, Socrates suggests the slander is the result of his search for one wiser than himself. This search required cross-examining those thought to be wise, only to prove in turn that these wise were in fact ignorant. Thus, his bad
name is the result of envy and hatred, and those he long ago showed to be foolish have harbored animus against him ever since.  

With this response, we have a picture of Socrates that differs greatly from the comic one painted by Aristophanes. Socrates is the devotee of the god, not his rival; his response to the public face of the caricature has been to emphasize his own public piety and civic duty. But what of the principal question, the serious criticism against which Socrates must inevitably respond? What of the claim that Socrates is inhumanly detached from his surroundings, so much so that his philosophy shows itself as radical freedom? One would think he has surely given an adequate response to this, given the noble picture he has painted of himself. But his picture was in response to the public criticisms of the *Clouds*; the parallels between the two works suggest that a more substantive response is forthcoming, one that firmly connects Socrates with his city and its citizens. Thus, we are not yet in a position to answer this question given the response Socrates has articulated to the old accusers. A response to the claim of radical freedom, freedom understood in distinction to anything political, requires an account before the polity itself. Only in this way can Socrates give a full account of his attachment to his fellow citizens, to those who stand as his judges. And this is precisely what the *Apology* does, for after his response to the old accusers.

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20 Listen to what Socrates says elsewhere about the nature of comedy; “So the account asserts that, in our laughing at the absurdities of our friends, in blending pleasures with envy, we are blending together pleasure with pain; for we had agreed some time ago that envy was a pain of soul, but laughing was a pleasure, and the pair of them occurred simultaneously in these times.” *Philebus*, 50a5 - 9, in Seth Benardete, *The Tragedy and Comedy of Life: Plato’s Philebus* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 60.
accusers is finished, Socrates shifts his focus to those men long influenced by slander and who have taken it upon themselves to defend the polity. Thus, if our understanding of Socrates’ dialogue with Aristophanes is to be complete, we must see how he responds to the city on its terms. Only then will be able to give an account of Socrates’ citizenship, so to speak, and thus of his relationship to political things.

The New Accusers

“So about the things which the first accusers accused me of, let this be a sufficient defense speech before you. But against Meletus, the ‘good and patriotic,’ as he says, and the later accusers, I will try to speak next in my defense.”

With these words, Socrates turns his attention to his primary accusers, those whose ill-will has brought about the present scene. Their accusations are as follows, “it asserts that Socrates does injustice by corrupting the young, and by not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other daimonia that are novel. The charge is of this sort.” In response to the formal charges, Socrates cross-examines Meletus the poet by asking him a series of questions that concern the education of the youth. If it were true, according to Meletus’ argument, that Socrates alone was guilty of corrupting the youth, then he would have been charged with a great injustice. Being that Meletus knows nothing about making the youth better, however, he is hardly in a position to accuse Socrates of corrupting. For all he

21 Apology, 24b3 - 6.

22 Ibid., 24b8 -11. Note again that there is a discrepancy between the official charges and what Socrates chooses to answer, which is only “of this sort.”
knows, many could corrupt the youth, but without knowing what is good for the young, leveling charges against Socrates is unfortunate indeed, “for it would be a great happiness for the young if one alone corrupts them, while the others benefit them. But in fact, Meletus, you have sufficiently displayed that you never gave any thought to the young. And you are making your own lack of care plainly apparent, since you have cared nothing about things for which you bring me in here.”23 How could Socrates be guilty of corruption when the accuser himself does not know the difference between what is good or bad for the youth?

Moreover, Meletus asserts that Socrates has corrupted the youth of Athens voluntarily, that is, he has purposefully attempted to do harm to them. Socrates is quick to point out, though, that if this were true, he would run the risk of being harmed by those he has corrupted, which surely cannot be a reasonable thing to do. Thus, if he is guilty of corrupting the youth, he has done so involuntarily, and must be admonished, not prosecuted; “Of this I am not convinced by you, Meletus, nor, do I suppose, is any other human being. But either I do not corrupt, or if I do corrupt, I do it involuntarily, so in both cases what you say is false. And if I corrupt involuntarily, the law is not that you bring me in here for such involuntary wrongs, but that you take me aside in private to teach and admonish me.”24 If Socrates corrupts the youth, he does so without intending to; his justice is no less than those who would accuse him. He may in fact be

23Ibid., 25b2 - 7.

24Ibid., 25e5 - 26a4.
imprudent, but no more so than anyone else. And if this is so, can he really still be considered imprudent?25

In order to vindicate adequately his relationship with the young, Socrates must deal with the charge of impiety, for at the heart of the corruption charge is the question of what Socrates believes in, and how that belief relates to the upbringing of Athens’ youth. The accusation leveled by the new accusers also brings the issue into a more particular focus; Socrates is accused of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, or to put this another way, of not believing in those gods recognized by his city. This charge is more specific, as it should be; the city is concerned primarily with its gods who oversee its laws on its behalf. Socrates is accused of introducing novel daimonia, mysterious half-god, half-mortal beings, that occupy the place traditionally held by the likes of Zeus, Athena, Apollo, etc. His corruption is thus one of substitution; Socrates’ disbelief leads him to corrupt the young by teaching them to disbelieve in their own gods, i.e. the gods of their fathers and grandfathers, and to embrace new and novel deities, ones known only to Socrates.

Socrates’ response requires first a matter of clarification:

For I am not able to understand whether you are saying that I teach them to believe that there are gods of some sort – and so I myself do believe that there are gods and am not completely atheistic and do not do injustice in this way – but that I do not believe in those in whom the city believes,

25Yet the duplicity of the Socrates of the Clouds was that he kept unjust speech on the grounds of the think-tank, not that he himself taught unjust speech. His corrupting imprudence may have been inadvertent, but that is to be expected of someone who is indifferent.

97
but in others, and this is what you charge me with, that I believe in others. Or do you assert that I myself do not believe in gods at all and that I teach this to others?26

Socrates’ cross-examination of Meletus attempts to clarify the issue by shifting the focus of the accusation towards the public accusations of the *Clouds*, to the charge of disbelief simply.

Meletus confirms that this is the issue at stake; “this is what I say, that you do not believe in gods at all.”27 Both accusations, of not believing in the gods of the city, and of not believing in any gods at all, find their inspiration in the *Clouds*, albeit in different ways. For reasons that presumably tell us something about the indifference charge’s legitimacy, Socrates chooses to base his defense on the public charge of simple atheism, a defense that has two parts.

First, Socrates draws Meletus’ attention to the fact that he does affirms the existence of deities, “Do I not even believe, then, that the sun and moon are gods, as other human beings do?”28 Socrates is no philosopher of nature, no Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, who asserts that the stone is sun and the moon is earth.29 Like everyone else, Socrates recognizes that the sun and moon are divine, and will surely testify to their existence. Meletus is mistaken when he imputes atheism to Socrates; the accuser himself is mired in contradiction when he says at the same time that the accused both believes and does not believe, “for he himself appears to me to be

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26Ibid., 26c2 - 8.

27Ibid., 26b9 - 10.

28Ibid., 26d1 - 3.

29Ibid., 26d4 - 5. Note here the similarity between what Socrates is accused of believing and what he was accused of teaching in the think-tank of the *Clouds*.
contradicting himself in the indictment, as if he were to say, ‘Socrates does injustice by not believing in the gods, but believing in gods.’ And yet this is the conduct of one who jokes.”

Second, if Socrates did not believe in divine things, he would not believe in divinities. But he does believe in daimons, or more specifically in the daimonia, which are the children of divinities. How could it be that Socrates does not believe in divine things when he believes in the offspring of divine things, which necessarily entails the existence of the divine:

Now then, you say that I believe in and teach daimonia; so whether they are novel or ancient, at any rate I do believe in daimonia according to your speech, and you also swore to this in your indictment. But if I believe in daimonia, then surely there is also a great necessity that I believe in daimones. Is this not so? Of course it is. . . And do we not believe that daimones are either gods or children of gods?  

Socrates cannot be guilty of atheism, for he himself asserts the existence of divine things; “. . . if daimones are certain bastard children of gods, whether from nymphs or from certain others of whom it is also said they are born, then what human being would believe that there are children of gods, but not gods?” With his professions of belief in the divinity of the sun and moon, as well as these daimones, it is clear that Socrates is not guilty of atheism.

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30Ibid., 27a3 - 7. Was it then nothing but a joke when Aristophanes showed Socrates professing disbelief in Zeus while proclaiming the existence of Ethereal Vortex? Possibly, but this joke does not discredit the true nature of the charge. It should also be noted that Socrates, in providing evidence of his belief in the city’s gods, would have been well served to elaborate more fully on his divinely-inspired mission. If he truly believed that his way of life was commissioned by Apollo, then it would have been to his advantage to remind the audience of the link. Curiously, he himself, through his very actions, never provides evidence of his belief in the Oracle’s prophesy, and his complete silence about it at this juncture is telling.

31Ibid., 27c5 - 13.

32Ibid., 27d4 - 7.
as in daimons, Socrates’ response to the charge of atheism draws to a close, and with it, his public demonstration of affection and attachment to his city and fellow citizens.

**Socrates: The Suffering Servant**

With his response to the accusations complete, and the ignorance of his accuser evident, Socrates has apparently completed what he set out to do. Instead of being guilty of indifference and imprudence, he has shown himself to be judicious, serious, and pious. He is not, as both the old and new accusers would have us believe, a threat to the city. Quite the opposite, he is the most just man alive, for he alone has taken as his way of life that endeavor which seeks to make clear the contradictory opinions that deal with happiness and living well. His speculations and interests do not lead him away from the city; quite the opposite, his motivations are, at heart, political. When he claims that his philosophical quest is motivated by piety because it is in accordance with the prophecy at Delphi, Socrates aligns his interests with those of the city, so much so that he could say, “know well, then, that the god orders this. And I suppose that until now no greater good has arisen for you in the city than my service to the god.”33 Socrates the philosopher has now become Socrates the first citizen by setting up a new example of civic virtue, one hitherto unseen and unknown in the ancient world.

Socrates’ attachment to Athens through his new civic virtue is developed further by augmenting his unique prudence, piety, and justice with a new, more sublime, element. **

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33Ibid., 30a6 - 8.
philosophizing in accordance with the city’s gods, and calling each citizen to give an account of his way of life beyond what circulates as mere opinion, Socrates has put the good of others ahead of his own. Socrates’ philosophizing has him living for others, seeking to rouse them from their slumber and be awakened to the possibility of true virtue. Such a life is not easy, as everyone who is asleep does not wish to be awakened.34 Yet Socrates is undeterred. In recognizing the potential animus that might be invoked through such an activity, Socrates poses this hypothetical question; “Then are you not ashamed, Socrates, of having followed the sort of pursuit from which you now run the risk of dying?”35 Socrates is aware that his divine calling will not always be met with a hero’s welcome, so much so that his life might be jeopardized in the process.

Having thus positioned himself to be a new sort of hero, a philosophical hero is you will, Socrates has become the suffering servant of the city in order that it might become better through his suffering. Socrates is the new Achilles, as is evidenced when he equates his unflinching service to the oracle with Achilles’ willingness to die nobly rather than avoid the prospect of death.36 So great is his service to Athens that he will not relent in his duty even if faced with the choice between death and a quiet, private existence:

Socrates, for now we will not obey Anytus; we will let you go, but on this condition: that you no longer spend time in this investigation or philosophize; and if you are caught still doing this, you will die” – if you would let me go, then as I said, on these conditions, I would say to you, “I,

34 Cf. Apology, 40c2 - 40e4.

35 Ibid., 28b3 - 5.

36 Ibid., 28b6 - 28d5.
men of Athens, salute you and love you, but I will obey the god rather than you; and as long as I breathe and am able to, I will certainly not stop philosophizing, and I will exhort you and explain this to whomever of you I happen to meet, and I will speak just the sorts of things I am accustomed to . . . .”

The new hero of Athens is a gadfly, a persistent pest whose job is to, “. . . awaken and persuade and reproach each one of you, and I do not stop settling down everywhere upon you the whole day.” Socrates’ mission reminds the city of its need for virtue, and he dutifully executes this mission with complete selflessness. He is the hero of Athens because he puts the good of Athens above his own good, and is content to endure the suffering that accompanies his fate because it is in the service of a greater good. By doing this, Socrates introduces a new philosophical truth, one that requires of each citizen that he take stock of his own life and attempt to determine how and in what ways his life is a good one. Athens’ new hero brings with him a new truth, but it is one that tells an old story. His exhortation to virtue has at its base a grounding in self-reflection, a self-reflection brought on by a messenger of the gods themselves. The heroic Socrates is also the new Athenian prophet.

37 Ibid., 29c6 - 29d7.

38 Ibid., 30e7 - 31a2.

Such a claim is magnanimous, to say the least. It will also require a bit of critical reflection before we install Socrates as the noble heir-apparent to Achilles. Before moving on to such reflection, let us take a moment to say a bit more about Socrates as the suffering servant. Socrates tells the jury that, so convinced is he that he does the gods’ work, he has made it his business to exhort people to become self-aware privately, that is, not in the public domain. He avoids public exhortation because long ago a voice first came to him, warning against certain activities and thereby protecting him from certain actions that would be harmful; “this is something which began for me in childhood: a sort of voice comes, and whenever it comes, it always turns me away from whatever I am about to do, but never turns me forward.”

The daimonic voice, this divine mark that Socrates alone possesses, functions as a negative, always steering him away from those things that would be detrimental to his well-being, and hence, his divine mission; “for comparison we might think of Socrates, whose ‘daemon’ gave him a remarkable sort of inspiration – not, indeed, any positive revelations, but something that turned him onto another track whenever he was inclined just to follow his own ideas or to agree with the general opinion.”

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40 Apology, 31d3 -5.

41 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Truth and Tolerance (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2003), pp. 145-146. Considerable work has been done on Socrates’ daimonion, so much so that a complete overview would be unruly. Nevertheless, two things must be stressed. First, the daimonion’s character is universally regarded as negative, as a super- or supra-rational force that prevented Socrates from engaging in certain actions. Friedlander gives a nice context to this when, speaking of Socrates’ comments about the daimonion in the Theages, he says, “Socrates himself
states the purpose of telling these stories: ‘because this demonic power is all-important for communion with those who seek my company. For there are many whom it resists. They cannot benefit from intercourse with me, and I am not capable of such intercourse. In many cases, it presents no obstacle to companionship, but the persons concerned derive no aid from it.’ Paul Friedlander, *Plato*, Vol. 1, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 34. Second, precisely because the daimonion functions negatively, i.e. it keeps Socrates from doing certain particular actions, it thereby also succeeds in positively by making clear what should be done. The best advocate of this position is Leo Strauss, whose comments on the daimonion follow Friedlander’s closely, but depart in crucial ways: “Socrates has recourse to his daimonion after the recourse to his being erotikos was of no avail; his daimonion replaces his being erotikos because it fulfills the same function – because it is the same. Socrates cannot profitably be together with people who are not promising, who are not attractive to him. He cannot well explain his refusal to be together with them by saying that he does not ‘love’ them; he refers to a mysterious power to which everyone must bow and which cannot be asked questions; recourse to the daimonion is needed only for justifying refusals (to act). The daimonion is forbidding, the denying aspect of Socrates’ nature, of his natural inclinations; its full or true aspect is his eros as explained in the Symposium: eros is daimonic, not divine.” Leo Strauss, “Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* and Crito,” *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 47.

42 *Apology*, 31e2 - 4.

43 There is also evidence that Socrates adequately fulfilled his military obligations (cf. *Symposium*, 220d4 - 221c1). One should note, however, that every example given of Socrates’ courage in battle is in the context of a retreat; “Socrates’ military exploits are limited to the protection of a friend and an orderly retreat. Each in its way was most impressive, but in neither
of the two cases Alcibiades mentions is Socrates seen fighting or harming the enemy. His is not the real courage of the soldier or the heroic risk taker. Nothing here is proof of civic virtue.” Allan Bloom, “The Ladder of Love,” Plato’s Symposium, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 168.

44But do these private exhortations to virtue not give Socrates an explicit right to rule? In a sense it does because of how much more just he is than his fellow citizens due to his learned ignorance. But he is also too decent for politics – or it is too vulgar for him – such that his philosophical activity must be done privately (Apology, 36b4 - c1). If Socrates’ daimonion is related to his eros as we have suggested, then his abstention from political life is ultimately an erotic problem, i.e., he has no love or attachment to the political. Those who wish to appropriate Socrates as a model for citizenship must reconcile the reason for his abstention from politics with the demands required of politics.
speech has shown a most divine man, one whose whole life, whether it be moving towards or in avoidance of his fellow citizen, is characterized by its relation to the gods.

**Heroism, Philosophy, and Freedom**

The Socrates of the *Apology* wishes to be seen as the most pious of citizens, and by extension, also as the most prudent and just. Socrates was a good citizen, if not the best, and those who look to him for inspiration must surely be correct in doing so. Aristophanes was complete wrong; he misinterpreted true piety for disbelief. But before we exonerate Socrates, let us fill out more fully his response to the private criticism – that of radical indifference. Socrates’ response to the city provided us with clues as to what he might say in private to Aristophanes, and we must venture to put these together in order to articulate a response that is in keeping with his newfound piety. Such a response might sound something like this: Aristophanes, for the sake of both theater and instruction you caricatured me, but in fact you had in mind only one true reproach. You see me as being distant from the city, detached from those things through which most men in most places most of the time find their meaning and fulfilment. You warn me about such freedom, for you say that I do not understand myself, nor those with whom I associate. Because of this, you suggest that I am dangerous because I am imprudent, a pariah whose influence indirectly leads to an assault on the traditional foundations of the city. You, Aristophanes, who feigns conservatism when in reality you are detached from the city much as you say I am, wish to warn me about the damage my ideas and conduct might do. You think I am
radically free, with no feeling of kinship for my fellow citizens. But I do have feelings of kinship for them, feelings so strong, in fact, that you are incapable of understanding them. I am not radically free; quite the opposite, I am completely dependent. What appears strange to you, and what you infer as being independent, is in fact radical dependence. My entire life has been lived for the sake of my fellow citizens. The gods of the city, our gods, have obliged me to make it my business to show our city the error in its ways. All of my time and energies have been spent laboring in this way, trying as I might to get men to give an account of their ways of life, all in the hope that our city might be made more holy through virtue. To a comic, one who is not by nature prone to seriousness, it must surely look strange for a man to leave behind his normal attachments and take up the cause of the whole. I have admitted to you this much when I said publicly that, ‘it does not seem human, on the one hand, that I have been careless of all my own things, and that for so many years now I have endured that the things of my family be uncared for; and on the other hand, that I always do your business, going to each of you privately, as a father or an older brother might do, persuading you to care for virtue.’ Apology, 31b1 - 6. It is you, however, who do not appreciate the uniqueness of my calling; it is you who do not appreciate my devotion to the gods. You believe I am joking when I say I am the greatest gift to Athens made by the gods, but you could only find that funny by failing to believe in my calling. I am, in truth, the complete opposite of your caricature. You may find my duty funny – that of course is your
prerogative – but do not warn me about my distance from the city. If anything it is you who are
dangerous, for it is you who mock that which the gods bid.

If Socrates is truly the heroic servant of Athens, then the *Apology* marks the point in
history when philosophy first becomes political. Socrates understand the primacy of what might
be called moral or ethical philosophy, so much so that his whole existence is contingent on fusing
that form of speculation with the actual practice of politics. Philosophy proper, then, is political
philosophy, and it is also political theology, for human inquiry finds its proper sphere in what
the gods themselves wish. Socrates is the first philosopher to call philosophy down from the
heavens, but he is also the first to compel it to return there.

**Evaluating Socrates’ Response: The Dramatic Climax**

Despite what one may think of the merits of Socrates’ response, one is compelled to
admit and admire its brilliance and subtlety. Socrates was most surely wise, and the speech he
offered is undoubtedly one of the most eloquent ever known. As soon as we admit this,
however, our analysis is thrown back on itself, for we remember that we are dealing with Plato’s
Socrates, and the written account to which we have access was not authored by the defendant
himself. Our awareness is thus brought back to the fact that the *Apology*, as we have noted
before, is a drama. It is a performed play, one that also affords us the luxury of dissection due to
it being written. We have focused on the arguments, and this was as it had to be, for we were in
search of how Socrates would have responded to the accusations of the *Clouds*. But the literary
nature of the work arouses our consciousness from the sweet slumber of argument; reality intervenes to force thought again to engage practice. No sooner is Socrates done making his defense speech then the dramatic climax of the story requires us to take account of that defense from another perspective.

Socrates’ defense is met with the verdict: Guilty. The action of the drama culminates in a conviction of Athens’ hero; the city does not recognize its savior, nor does it relish the introspection his divine mission seeks to foist upon it. Socrates’ arguments attempted to show that he was neither distant from the city nor a danger to it. Quite the opposite, he was its greatest blessing, the highest benefaction bestowed by the gods. But the drama of the Apology, and this is where argument and medium meet most clearly and most importantly, shows that the city rejects Socrates’ claim. Despite his claims of good-will, the city does not believe Socrates; Aristophanes’ warnings have been taken to heart. But they have been heeded in a way not in

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46 “The hostility of the ordinary man towards scientific speculation was not simply due to his normal distaste for abstract reasoning or to the somewhat dogmatic form of exposition, inadequately supported by empirical evidence, which was often favoured by Greek intellectuals. The ordinary man regarded his own life as dependent on the goodwill of the gods, who caused his crops to grow and his animals to increase, and it was well known that gods might punish a shipful of men, even a whole city, if one blasphemer in it were allowed to go unpunished.” Dover, Aristophanic Comedy, p. 109.

47 Does this mean, no matter the intended good-will, that Aristophanes’ caricature was ultimately responsible for Socrates’ death? Consider what James Rhodes says about the comic poet’s relationship to the philosopher; “I conclude that Aristophanes is hostile to Socrates, or, at the absolute least, that he is much too blase about the peril that he is creating, for Socrates.” James Rhodes, Eros, Wisdom, and Silence (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 2003), p. 247. Rhodes comes to this conclusion, however, based on a reading of the Clouds that fails to
appreciate the distinctiveness of Socrates, and hence, cannot see the caricature apart from its comical sophistry or rationalism. If anything, Socrates’ conviction means the exact opposite—that the caricature may in fact have prolonged the inevitable through a comic catharsis of sorts, of disarming that which is dangerous through laughter. In this sense, Aristophanes’ literary power could serve both a public and private purpose through its own poetical influence, but not one powerful enough to effect ultimately a resolution between the philosopher and the city. The comic may in fact possess an ability the philosopher does not, but it is not one that in the end can bring about a political reconciliation.
Socrates’ private defense. Having now exhausted the arguments, we are forced to reexamine the basic structure of the *Apology* in the hopes of finding a new avenue for our examination.

We recall that the *Apology* is a drama whose virtue is making the reader attentive to both speech and deed alike. There are characters in a drama, all of whom can be thought to contribute to the overall direction and outcome of the play. Socrates is most surely the main character of the *Apology*, but one would be incorrect, or at least a bit imprudent, if they were to infer that he is also the protagonist of the story. It is possible that he represents the antagonist of this story, and despite how odd that seems to be on the surface, we are compelled to admit it as a possibility given what has transpired with the climax. What if the climax serves as a reminder that the protagonist of this story is the city itself?

One must also not forget that the *Apology* is a compulsory dialogue; Socrates’ defense speech is not given freely. Given that the context of this compulsion was Socrates’ radical freedom, we could not help but notice the incongruity of the setting, and thus, its ironic character. The city itself is aware of Socrates’ irony, as he himself admits when he says that, “for if I say that this is to disobey the god and that because of this it is impossible to keep quiet, you will not be persuaded by me, on the ground that I am being ironic.”48 It is necessary, then, to begin the

48 Ibid., 37e6 - 38a2. Socrates’ famous irony is as problematic a concept as is his daimonion, meaning that the scholarship dealing with the former is as intractable as the latter. By far the most important scholar to deal with this problem in recent times is Gregory Vlastos, whose book on the theme is as influential as it is cogent (Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), especially pp. 21-44). Vlastos himself, however, recognizes the importance of other thinkers to this subject, and one would do
second part of our examination by looking more closely at Socrates’ defense, paying particular attention to the arguments he has used to justify himself. By doing so we will accomplish two things: first, we will be able to sketch the last layer of arguments that contribute to our dialogue between Aristophanes and Socrates, and hence, to discern the true core of Socrates’ private response to Aristophanes’ private criticisms. Second, by laying clear the foundations of this dialogue, we should also begin to get a sense, if only in a preliminary way, of the author’s opinion about the central character of the *Apology*, whether he be protagonist or antagonist.

**Problematic Piety**

A complete reexamination of Socrates’ defense speech in the *Apology* would be both tedious and unnecessary. We must look instead for clues as to why his speech was unsuccessful, and having found such clues, piece together the inadequacies of the defense. Two such clues present themselves immediately, forming the perfect starting point for our investigation. The first thing we notice is that the *Apology* is Socrates’ defense speech, which curiously enough, he does not take as seriously as befits a capital trial. On two separate occasions when dealing with the charges leveled against him, Socrates takes neither the time nor effort to specify correctly the well to heed his suggestions by consulting Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony With Continual References to Socrates*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), and Paul Friedlander, *Plato*, Vol. I, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), especially, pp. 137-153. This study has also found Alexander Nehamas’ work *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) to be inordinately useful, especially his chapters on Platonic and Socratic irony. To these we will add only one slight nuance: Socrates’ indebtedness to Aristophanes suggests that his irony has a public, and hence, political aspect that cannot be ignored.
charges. When recalling the charges made by the old accusers, he ends his recitation by saying, “it is something like this.”\textsuperscript{49} He repeats this seemingly gross inaccuracy when he switches to the charges of the new accusers by saying, “the charge is of this sort.”\textsuperscript{50} Despite what he has told us at the beginning of his speech, that, “they are not ashamed that they will immediately be refuted by me in deed, as soon as it becomes apparent that I am not a clever speaker at all,” Socrates has proven through the course of his defense to be anything but an incapable speaker.\textsuperscript{51} His nonchalance with regard to the exact charges suggests a lack of seriousness that attends naturally to serious things. Would it not be most prudent to take seriously those charges against which you will be judged, and according to which your life hangs in the balance? Such nonchalance suggests that Socrates defense is not exhausted by a reading the focuses solely on the merits of the arguments; Socrates does not appear to be primarily interested in acquittal. Can one say that, with regard to the charges as such, Socrates is indifferent?

But what of this? Did we not already have suspicion of such when we noted that the tone of the \textit{Apology}, based merely on its setting, was ironic? This is certainly true, and at one level it gives substance to an argument based primarily on form. On another level, however, it points at the disconcerting nature of the defense, a subtlety testified to by the reception of the

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\textsuperscript{49}\textit{Apology}, 19c2.
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\textsuperscript{50}\textit{Ibid.}, 24c1 - 2. 
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\textsuperscript{51}\textit{Ibid.}, 17b1 - 2. 
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audience. The second clue is the rather odd, almost humorous way in which the audience, the jury who will ultimately judge Socrates, interrupts him at key points in his speech. One could say that such interaction, the public voicing of both contempt and approval to the speaker’s speech, was a perfectly normal part of the give-and-take of Athenian trials. One would be correct in asserting this, but simply leaving it there is insufficient without probing into the relevance of these interruptions occurring when and in reaction to what they do. Certain parts of Socrates’ statements are met with the disapproval of the jury, and one must look to those statements specifically to see if they tell us something important about Socrates’ speech.52

The first such example occurs, interestingly enough, as Socrates gives an account of his divinely sanctioned philosophical mission.53 Socrates tells the story of how his comrade Chaerephon sought out the priestess at Delphi in order to inquire whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. To the mere suggestion of the oracle’s relationship to Socrates’ wisdom the jury makes its displeasure known; “and in particular he once even went to Delphi and dared to

52 Eric Voegelin describes the mood of the trial well when he says, “The atmosphere must have been tense. More than once Socrates had to admonish the large court not to break out in noisy demonstrations that would disturb his defense. One can imagine how incensed a considerable number among the Five Hundred must have been by the conduct of Socrates and his assurance that he would go on with his god-ordained task, even if they let him off lightly.” Eric Voegelin, “Plato and Aristotle,” The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 16 (Columbia: The University of Columbia Press, 2000), p. 9.

53 Apology, 21a6. Note that a bit earlier, at 20e5, Socrates begins the introduction to the story of the oracle with an appeal to the jury to not make disturbances. In so doing, he shows beforehand that his story will more than likely be met with skepticism. His skepticism is confirmed during the first outbreak of disturbances.
consult the oracle about this – now as I say, do not make disturbances, men – and he asked whether there was anyone wiser than I.”\textsuperscript{54} Socrates’ attempt to link his philosophizing with Apollo’s sanction is met with instant incredulity; the Athenian citizens have severe reservations about the degree to which Socrates’ philosophizing is related to the city’s gods.

One need not speculate too much as to why this was the case – Socrates himself shows little outward respect for the oracle when he tells us that, “I went to one of those reputed to be wise, on the ground that there, if anywhere, I would refute the divination and show the oracle, ‘This man is wiser than I, but you declared that I was wisest.’”\textsuperscript{55} It suffices to say here that the drama of the \textit{Apology} points out the antagonism between Socrates’ story and the reception that story received. The jury seems more inclined to view Socrates’ rationale as invented, a story hatched more for rhetorical purposes than for historical accuracy. Their reaction to Socrates is very important, for we must not be too quick to dismiss what might point us in the right direction. And as we delve deeper into Socrates’ defense, we too are increasingly unconvinced, for Socrates speech begins to be characterized less by its piety and nobility than for its insincerity.

In order to “refute” the oracle, and to prove that the gods had spoken incorrectly about his wisdom, Socrates sets out on his divine mission in an attempt to find those who might be

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., 21a4 -7.

\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., 21b10 - 21c3.
wiser than he. He begins with the politicians, those who are reputed to be most wise. In cross-examining them with regard to their wisdom, Socrates finds them lacking, not being able to give an account of themselves or their wisdom. They believe they know when in fact they do not, and Socrates’ exposure of this invites their resentment and hatred. So to with the poets and craftsmen, all of whom he finds lacking in knowledge of the truly noble and good things. From these examinations, Socrates is able to conclude that the oracle may have spoken the truth, if only in saying that, “. . . really the god is wise, and that in this oracle he is saying that human wisdom is worth little or nothing.” Socrates’ mission is sanctioned through a negation of knowledge; only by showing that human wisdom is worthless does Socrates justify both his philosophizing and the gods of the city. Gods and philosophy become intertwined in Socrates’ learned ignorance, while philosophy and politics become intertwined in mutual insufficiency.

Having already developed our critical eye, though, we cannot help but be aware of the examination’s shortcomings. Socrates goes to those reported to be wise, but where are the philosophers in his examination? Is their wisdom dismissed out of hand as being unworthy or unfit for cross-examination? Chaerophon’s question of the oracle was whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. Socrates was then already considered wise before the oracle’s prophesy, but we are left wondering wise in what sense? There is no evidence that Socrates’ investigations into moral and political matters were a life long preoccupation; quite the opposite, we have evidence

56Ibid., 23a5 - 7.
of his youthful flirtations with the sort of natural philosophy associated with the think-tank in the *Clouds*.\(^{57}\) We are left wondering not only in what manner Socrates was wise before the prophesy of the oracle, but why this wisdom is somehow outside of, if not in opposition to, the sphere of natural philosophy?

Moreover, and maybe not coincidentally, Socrates’ examination of the poets appears lacking. When seeking out the poets, Socrates approached “those of tragedies and dithyrambs, and the others, in order that there I would catch myself in the act of being more ignorant than they.”\(^{58}\) Here too his eagerness was unsatisfied, for, as he says, “almost everyone present, so to speak, would have spoken better than the poets did about the poetry that they themselves had made.”\(^{59}\) The reason for this was simple; “I soon recognized that they do not make what they make by wisdom, but by some sort of nature and while inspired, like the diviners and those who deliver oracles.”\(^{60}\) Socrates’ dissatisfaction with the poets shares a marked similarity to his uneasiness with the Delphic oracle’s prophesy. This should not be surprising given Socrates’ need of having an account accompany divinations or oracles that pronounce on the noble and good things. What is surprising, though, is who is not subjected to Socrates’ withering

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\(^{57}\) Cf. *Phaedo*, 96a6 - 100a10.

\(^{58}\) *Apology*, 22a9 - 22b2.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 22b7 - 9.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 22b10 - 13.
examinations. In all his dealings with the poets, Socrates does not seek out the comics, those with whom he might be said to share the most in common. Socrates associates with the serious poets, i.e., the poets whose subject matter is outwardly the most serious and solemn. But as our own investigation has shown, just because something is not serious on the outside does not mean its teachings about the good and noble are lacking. Socrates has left out the comic poets from his poetical cross-examination, and one is forced to ask if there is not a serious reason for a comic exclusion. Is it that the comics have nothing to say? Or is it that Socrates has avoided those who would first make him look at himself?

These questions, and many more like them, must stay unanswered for now. At the moment, we must remind ourselves that Socrates’ justification for his way of life – the oracle at Delphi, his description of that way of life, and the examination of the politicians, poets and craftsmen – raises doubts about his defense and motivations. His speech has become uncomfortably insincere, and with that insincerity comes renewed doubts about his piety and justice, and ultimately, his indifference. These reservations form the basis for our critical appraisal of his defense. But this appraisal most also take account of Socrates’ response to the new accusers, seeking not only to complete the account whose foundations were laid through the old accusers, but also to complement our overarching dialogue with the comic poet who was impolitely left out of the poetic inspection.
Socrates’ defense against the new accusers is almost completely oriented around his cross-examination of Meletus. Whatever one may think of this scene, it is undeniable that the substance of the interrogation provides little support against the charge at hand. For instance, Socrates deals with the first of the two charges, corrupting the youth, by leading Meletus through a series of questions that deal with the theme of human excellence and training. Socrates is interested in finding out who Meletus believes makes the youth better, which is the flip side of the corruption charge. He succeeds in demonstrating that the young man cannot answer this, that all he can muster as an answer is what Socrates sums up when he says, “then all the Athenians, as it appears, make them noble and good except me, and I alone corrupt them. Is this what you are saying?” Meletus cannot articulate who makes the youth better, and hence, does not know what makes the youth better.

One could be swayed by this argument if not for the fact that Socrates’ defense, which has surely shown the young man to be ignorant, fails to answer the charge itself. Socrates’ answer to the charge of corruption was largely an argument *ad hominem*, it focused on the accuser instead of the accusation. By changing the terms of the argument, Socrates forced the

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61”Socrates’ response to the impiety charge is no more convincing: it amounts simply to a proof that Meletus contradicts himself (not even that the charge contradicts itself!). Socrates is completely silent about whether he believes in any gods at all, let alone the gods of the city. Yet, as he admits, this is the heart of Meletus’ charge against him (26b).” West, “Introduction,” *Four Texts on Socrates*, p. 19.

focus off of himself as one who corrupts and onto Meletus as one with knowledge and skill in training. The one does not necessarily have anything to do with the other. This is shown even more clearly in the first exchange, when Socrates asks Meletus, “but tell, my good man, who makes them (the youth) better?” Meletus’ response to this is quite simple: “the laws.” Socrates is dissatisfied with this response, which incidentally is altogether in keeping with the thrust of the charges, and remarks, “but I am not asking this, best of men, but rather what human being is it who knows first of all this very thing, the laws?” Socrates is intent on making Meletus focus on the teacher, an intention designed to discredit the accuser. But Meletus was quite right to respond to Socrates’ question with the answer he gave, for it is the laws that not only teach but also give life to virtue at the political level. This is precisely what Socrates is charged with doing, and his cross-examination of Meletus gives more evidence for his guilt than against it. It is enough to mention that Socrates ends his defense against the corruption charge by opening it up again as a possibility, albeit an involuntary one.

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63 Ibid., 24d12 - 13.
64 Ibid., 24d14.
65 Ibid., 24e1 - 2.
67 What if Meletus would have responded to Socrates by saying “the lawgiver?” Socrates would have had to question the knowledge of not only Solon, but also Athena herself. Would this too not demonstrate his guilt?
68 Apology, 25e6 - 26a6.
Socrates is aware that the corruption charge necessarily involves the question of atheism, and next turns to deal with the accusation anew. He refreshes everyone’s memory by attempting to clarify the charge. But in doing so, he again slightly alters the focus of the discussion, and thus introduces another level of suspicion. By attempting, as he says, to make clear what the true accusation is, Socrates ever so slightly gets the eager Meletus to begin down a path that will lead to contradiction. The charge against Socrates is that he does not believe in the gods the city believes in, but in other novel *daimonia*. But by playing on Meletus’ anger and indignation, attested to by his exclamation, “I certainly do say this, most vehemently,” Socrates tricks the young man into following a hopeless line of reasoning. The charge against Socrates is a particular transgression, one that has a specific frame of reference. Socrates transposes the accusation onto a universal level, and in doing so, sets up the foundations of his defense. As he tells us, “do I not even believe, then, that sun and moon are gods, as other human beings do?” As a defense against the charge, Socrates brings forth the sun and moon as examples of his piety. To be sure, these were entities believed to be gods by most Athenians, but in using them as his only examples of civic piety, Socrates’ leaves much to be desired. It suffices to say that by using

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69Ibid., 26b7.

70Ibid., 26d1 - 3.
as examples of his piety two wholly verifiable phenomena we can infer nothing positive about Socrates’ belief in the gods of the city. 71

Assessing the Response

Our investigation has now been through Socrates’ defense twice, first sympathetically to allow Socrates to give an account of himself, and then critically, looking for the shortcomings of that account. This was done with the hope that a clearer sense of the Apology’s drama could be gained, seeking to reconcile Socrates’ claim to be the greatest gift of the gods to the city with the sobering climax of the guilty verdict. These things can be reconciled, and the reconciliation puts an interesting twist on the relationships between Aristophanes and Socrates, not to mention both to Plato. The first thing to be noted is that Socrates was found guilty because the jury failed to believe his defense, a point in the drama of the Apology that cannot be overlooked or overemphasized. We have noted many problems with what can be called Socrates’ “piety,” and all of these shortcomings associated with Socrates’ defense speech ultimately take us back to the dialogue we set up between the philosopher and the comic. Aristophanes’ charge – the private accusation of radical indifference – was a key aspect integrated into the drama of the Apology. Socrates’ chief response, his inhuman piety and requisite nobility and justice, was found to be

71 Socrates’ argument about the daimonia hurts his cause even more. It is true that to believe in daimonia, one must believe in daimons, and if one believes in daimons, one must believe in divinities. This says nothing, however, about what divinities these may be, and moreover, does nothing to disprove the second half of the accusation – introducing novel daimonia.
lacking, and as such does not form a convincing response to the charge. Let us explore this
dynamic in a little more detail.

When Aristophanes charged Socrates’ with not believing in the city’s gods, Socrates
responded with a heroic story that told of a heroic deed commissioned for a heroic person. But
this response was not persuasive, just as his cross-examination of Meletus also failed to
demonstrate his salutary influence. Even if Socrates believes in gods that are somehow higher or
more divine than the ones the city believes in, he has done little to make us or the jury believe
him. Quite the opposite, the weakness of his arguments and the irony of his tone suggests one
would do well to suspend the benefit of the doubt. This point is important, for if Socrates’
piety is truly problematic, then so too is the nobility of his mission and the justice of his way of
life. If Socrates’ piety is problematic, and the charge of atheism is still on the table, then the
degree to which he is at all a benefit to the city and supporter of its justice must be questioned.
We are compelled to say that, to the charge of atheism the Apology says of Socrates: it is
possible. And if it is possible that he did not believe in the gods of the city or otherwise, then to
the charge of radical indifference one must begrudgingly admit its possibility too, if only in a
qualified manner.

The caricature of Socrates in the Clouds was a danger because he was too distant, because
he was too far removed from the everyday ephemeral things to be able to protect himself from
the city and the city from himself. The Apology qualifies this fear a bit, but it does little to put
to rest the basic fear; if anything, the dialogue does more to confirm than oppose it. One of the key causes for concern was Socrates’ imprudence, his lack of care for people’s motivations that indirectly led to the wide circulation of his dangerous ideas, ideas that left to Socrates alone would be harmless, but when spread to those who were not so detached from the everyday world could be terribly destructive. The *Apology* goes a long way, not in defending Socrates from the question of imprudence, but condemning him for it. True, Socrates now appears as prudent, and in many respects he is aware of the need for prudence, which qualifies the ridiculous figure in the *Clouds*. On a much deeper level, though, maybe even at the most fundamental of levels, Socrates might nevertheless still be open to the charge. He admits as much when he says, “I have never been anyone’s teacher; but if anyone, whether younger or older, desired to hear me speaking and doing my own things, I never begrudged it to him.” Now, depending on what was being said, this very sentence could have been uttered by the Socrates of the *Clouds* with no modification. Such a statement suggests Socrates was aware of the need for prudence by proclaiming himself no one’s teacher, but that he nonetheless was accessible, and this because his concern was first with himself and not others.

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72 It may suggest Socrates learned something from the caricature; it may even be possible that Socrates learned to recognize his own powerlessness through the disenchancing effects of the caricature. Indeed, one could envision that the specific form of prudence Socrates took from his teacher Aristophanes was that of irony.

73 Ibid., 33a5 - 7.
What is more, Socrates only convinced us that, at best, he had done harm to no one voluntarily. This may be, but Aristophanes never charged Socrates with malevolence. He charged him with doing harm indirectly, and the Socrates of the *Apology* is completely open to this charge. The Socrates of the *Clouds* was a problem because Strepsiades sought and got just enough of Socrates’ wisdom to do harm, a situation created by Socrates’ lack of concern for what he would do with the wisdom beforehand. There is nothing in the *Apology* that would suggest Socrates has assuaged this fear; if anything, the Socrates of the *Apology* is more of a threat than the one of the *Clouds* precisely because his whole concern is human matters. It may be helpful to hear another account of Socrates, one that is more somber but at the same time just as insightful:

For my part, I believe that if a god had offered them (Critias and Alcibiades) either to live their whole life just as they saw Socrates live, or to die, these two would have chosen rather to die. And they made this clear by their actions. For as soon as these two believed themselves superior to their companions, they immediately bolted from Socrates and engaged in political affairs, which was precisely the reason they had yearned for Socrates. Now perhaps someone might say in response that Socrates should not have taught his companions political affairs before he taught them to be moderate. I, for my part, do not deny this. But I see that all teachers both show themselves to students – how they themselves do what they teach – and convince by speeches.74

To the charge of imprudence, then, Socrates stands justly accused. Even though he was aware of those who might do harm with what he was saying, he nevertheless did not stop philosophizing because of it.

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Is Socrates thus guilty of radical indifference? Surely he is not the idiot intellectual of the *Clouds*, more interested in fleas and gnats than virtue and goodness. His wholly moral focus testifies to both his seriousness and uniqueness as a philosopher of human things. The Socrates of the *Apology* has seemingly heeded the warning of the *Clouds*, if not with complete satisfaction. Socrates is now intensely aware of his settings; he understands that in some crucial respects philosophy is decidedly political. It may in fact be the case that Socrates has learned of the need to justify his philosophizing, and that with reference to the greatest of alternatives to his way of life – that which does not demand assent so much as obedience. The literary manifestation of this would be the oracle, which is a symbol of his recognition that his way of life had to be justified with reference to its greatest threat, i.e., that which served as the most profound rival to the superiority of the philosophical way of life:

As a distinct way of life that rests on a conscious choice and is held fast in the face of all resistance, philosophy is an answer to the question of what is right, an answer that is always already confronted with authoritative answers to the question of what is right and just for man. It meets the political obligations and moral demands that oppose it with the will to enforcement. It is subject to the law of the commonwealth, divine or human commandments and prohibitions. In the confrontation with the *theios nomos* of a given polis, it discovers *physis* and finds itself.75

Socrates has learned well from Aristophanes – the tale of the Oracle ultimately fulfills the requirements demanded by the Clouds.

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75 Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 7. It also suggests, however, that Socrates’ shortcoming is found not in his need to justify his way of life, or lack thereof, but in his ability to persuade others of that justification. Cf. note 15.
There can be no clearer evidence of this than the dialogue itself, for, as we have said so often, the *Apology* is a compulsory dialogue. Socrates is made to give an account of his life before his own community, and nowhere does he show directly or indirectly any resentment at having to do so. The city is the plane upon which the alternative ways of life open to man become accessible, but is also the level at which one of those ways will inevitably hold sway. And because one holds sway – because one become comprehensive – the city is in turn compelled to protect that comprehensiveness. Socrates seems to understand that the city must protect itself, so much so in fact that when the verdict is passed down, he informs us he is not at all indignant. He is urbane and polite in the face of death, a fact that seems to show respect for the city and its laws. This understanding of his circumstance goes hand in hand with another uniqueness of the Socrates of the *Apology*. Plato’s Socrates is no ethereal specter, hovering above ground in a basket. He is instead a man of intense self-knowledge, seeking to know himself and others through an intensive investigation of what is most important to man as man. The Socrates of the *Apology* clearly has moral priorities, and because of these priorities one is entitled to say he has certainly listened to the warnings of the *Clouds*.

To hear and to be, however, are not the same thing, and while the Socrates of the *Apology* has clearly learned to recognize the essential importance of his surroundings, he shows no evidence of being any more attached to them than was Aristophanes’ caricature. It is one thing to

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*Apology*, 35e1
engage in earnest the alternatives to the philosophical way of life with a view to establishing what is best for man simply; it is quite something else to live and thrive within those horizons the foundations of which are not in question. He himself has admitted that his way of life appears to most as inhuman, far divorced from the everyday life of most men. He shows no inclinations towards that which attracts most men, and the stories of his almost comic family life are well documented.\textsuperscript{77} When one adds to this the unsatisfactory account of his defense speech, which sheds a certain amount of suspicion on Socrates’ motivation or intentions, one is forced again to have recourse to Aristophanes’ warnings. He is painfully at odds with the status quo, so much so that he has to give a fanciful account of a divinely inspired mission just to attempt to reconcile himself with the city. That he does so suggests he is aware of his distance; that he fails in his attempt suggests the distance is too great. Whatever has caused this incredible distance, an issue to which we will turn next, Socrates’ seems to be too free from the city to ever effect a positive reconciliation.

\textsuperscript{77}On this account, hear the way Xenophon describes the reasons for which Socrates took the wife he did; “I do with her, said Socrates, like those who would learn horsemanship; they do not choose easy tame horses, or such as are manageable at pleasure, but the highest mettled and hardest mounted, believing if they can tame the natural heat and impetuosity of these, there can be none too hard for them to manage. I propose to myself very near the same thing, for having designed to converse with all sorts of people, I believed I should find nothing to disturb me in their conversation or manners, being once accustomed to bear the unhappy temper of Xantippe.” Xenophon, \textit{The Banquet}, in \textit{Plato and Xenophon: Socratic Discourses} (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1923), p. 167.
Conclusion

We have seen that in many respects, including the most decisive, the Apology agrees with the assessment of Socrates offered by the Clouds. And if this is true, we are compelled to say that Plato agreed with Aristophanes about the nature of his teacher.\footnote{This suggests, of course, that Plato counts Aristophanes as one of his teachers; “And as for Aristophanes – that transfiguring, complementary spirit for whose sake one forgives everything Hellenic for having existed, provided one has understood in its full profundity all that needs to be forgiven and transfigured here – there is nothing that has caused me to meditate more on Plato’s secrecy and sphinx nature than that happily preserved petit fait that under the pillow of his deathbed there was found no ‘Bible,’ nor anything Egyptian, Pythagorean, or Platonic – but a volume of Aristophanes. How could even Plato have endured life – a Greek life he repudiated – without an Aristophanes,” Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), p.231. Consider also George Anastaplo’s words on this point, “Still, it should be noticed, Plato is said to have recommended the reading of Aristophanes to the tyrant, Dionysius of Syracuse. It is also said that when Plato died he had a volume of Aristophanes’ comedies under his pillow. At the highest levels, we suspect, much is shared by the philosopher and the poet (including the poet who, in the form of a prophet, serves the cause of divine revelation).” George Anastaplo, The Thinker as Artist (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997), p. 180.}  Plato’s Apology demonstrates, albeit in a very indirect manner, that the problem of Socrates was that Socrates was a problem, and this because he was characterized most decisively by a form of freedom that put him at a distance from his city. We can see that those who look to Socrates as a model for civic excellence do so at their own peril, if only because Socrates’ literary silence is but one manifestation of a profound indifference to the political community. Plato’s own writing appears to correct for this shortcoming, for it is only through his dialogues that we are able to see the problem as it shows itself. The Apology is Plato’s depiction of Socrates’ answer to
Aristophanes’ warning. In showing himself as a party to their public dialogue, Plato depicts himself as a dramatic defender of Socrates, both as a figurative part of the city, and an intentional author of the dramatic encounter.\footnote{Apology, 34a1 & 38b6.} The idiosyncracy of Plato’s presence in the \textit{Apology} cannot be a coincidence:

> But there can be no true reputation without some one or ones who know, or can come to know, the truth. And Socrates’ primary addressees in the \textit{Apology of Socrates} are in effect “the many,” of whom he had said on another occasion (\textit{Gorgias} 474a7-b1) that he does not converse with them; if he does so now (37a6-7), it is merely in compliance with his legal obligation to defend himself (19a6-7; compare 18a7); they are not likely to know or to come to know the truth about him. . . Indeed, Socrates makes scarcely an assertion of any importance in the \textit{Apology of Socrates} that is not contradicted by him either at once or later on in the same work. If he was not confused, then, he must have had in mind someone who would have been able to catch the contradictions (without the opportunity that we have to read and reread his remarks) and to understand their bearing. . . We are thus entitled to say that the \textit{Apology of Socrates} presents a conversation of Socrates with Plato, the only one (of what must have been many such conversations) that our author has permitted us to witness.\footnote{Christopher Bruell, \textit{On the Socratic Education: An Introduction to the Shorter Platonic Dialogues} (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999), pp. 136-7.}

But we cannot yet know exactly how Plato’s writing solves the problem, for we as yet do not know the true nature of the problem. For this, we must ask why it is that Socrates was so detached from his community; what compelled him to forsake the sort of connections that normally sustain men in lieu of a way of life dedicated to the sort of knowledge typically associated with virtue and goodness? To answer this, we must ask an otherwise silent Plato, for only he can tell us both what caused Socrates’ distance and in what ways that distance does not apply to our author because he is our author. We must look for accounts of both distance and everydayness, good and one’s own, transcendence and eminence. It is not surprising that he who

stands in this tension also authors the work within which this tension shows its full beauty. If we are to answer our questions we must look to that work in which both Socrates and Aristophanes give accounts of their attachments or lack thereof. We are in luck, for we have just such an account. It is to this account – to Plato’s Symposium – that we now turn.
Chapter 4: Creation in the Beautiful: 
The Coincidence of Poetry and Philosophy

We know that there would not be even one who, if he heard this, would refuse, and it would be self-evident that he wants nothing else than this; and he would quite simply believe he had heard what he had been desiring all along: in conjunction and fusion with the beloved, to become one from two. The cause of this is that this was our ancient nature and we were wholes. So love is the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole.

_Symposium_, 192e5 - 193a1

It is hard for us today to imagine the true nature of the problem we face with Socrates, for it is difficult to comprehend what is meant when we characterize Socrates as being distant. True, Socrates was eccentric, and eccentric people often appear distant to the casual observer because they fail to fit into previously defined patterns of behavior. They have tastes that differ from the norm, or opinions that strike normal people as odd if not ridiculous. They may even have a certain measure of wisdom that contributes to their looking down upon common opinion, and in turn being looked upon with suspicion. One need only imagine a contemporary artist, caught up in his own brilliance and creativity, yet dismayed by the lack of reception on the part of the unenlightened audience to understand how eccentricity can contribute both to distance and suspicion. This example helps us see that the problem of distance, no matter how diluted or comical, is always with us; as long as there is an imperfect whole composed of individuals, there will always be imperfect individuals dissatisfied with the whole.

Yet, if we stop at this simple analogy, we miss a great deal of the depth associated with Socrates’ nature. Socrates may have been eccentric, but he was also much more. The _Clouds_ and the _Apology_ have pointed toward a radical form of distance, one that is not exhausted in the
typical examples of eccentricity. No matter how eccentric our imaginary artist is, he nevertheless makes his art under the assumption, however inchoate, that it will be viewed, heard, felt, experienced. The very distance that separates him from his audience is circumscribed, if not created, by his need of that audience. No matter how far out he goes, the artist must always return to the city to be witnessed; in a way his art connects the artist to others at the same time it separates him. He needs others, their attention, their witness, maybe even their admiration. But herein lies our problem, for our Socrates is no artist, or if he is, his dialectic art needs no witness and does not bring him back to the city. There is little that connects Socrates to his city; his eccentricity is not determined in relation to others. He does not need the approval or admiration of others; if anything, he looks down upon such need and dependence. His distance shows itself as an extreme, and thus most complete, form of self-sufficiency, as a whole unto itself without need or want.

It is this radical distance that is so difficult to understand, precisely because those of us who do not share in it have little experience against which to compare. Aristophanes and Plato have given us a glimpse into that which we cannot understand by ourselves; they have pushed us to see a disconnect so deep that it becomes a problem whose only solution, at least politically, was execution. Furthermore, it fails to accord somehow with our image of Socrates, and surely with what some have taken to be his civic character. Socrates’ self-sufficiency stands in stark contrast to his philosophizing, his zealous pursuit of wisdom for which he was so well known,
even in the works of Aristophanes and Plato. But how can this be? How can one so indifferent to everything else find himself singularly in need of, nay, in desperate preoccupation with, that which cannot love him in return? How can the greatest of lovers, the man known immortally for his love of wisdom, find fulfilment and self-sufficiency in that which cannot reciprocate his passion? In mixing this notion of distance together with his love of wisdom, we are left with an even greater sphinx, one who piques our curiosity but who nonetheless appears to us as paradoxical, if not comic. We have only then to follow the lead set for us by Aristophanes and Plato, knowing full well that our efforts will be severely hampered due to our own lack of self-sufficiency and dimmed passion for learning. We begin where we must, not by creating an artificial dialogue between texts as we have heretofore, but by witnessing a real dialogue within a text. Thus, we turn to the Symposium, the only situation in which Aristophanes and Socrates are seen together exchanging speeches and telling tales about nothing less than the basis of true human attachments.

Setting the Stage

It is fitting that Aristophanes and Socrates are shown together only once, with the setting for that encounter being a discussion of eros, or that phenomenon which typically binds together human beings. How better to orchestrate a meeting of two uneasy comrades than within an atmosphere of friendship and attraction. If we are to understand what separates Socrates from other men, we must know what drives him, what desires he seeks to fulfill, and how that
fulfilment relates to the desires of his fellow man and city. And as we see Socrates’ eros in relation to other expressions of love, ones that may or may not offer alternatives equal to that of our philosopher, we are necessarily compelled to evaluate those expressions, looking for both clarity and grace, insight and beauty. To be sure, eros is a human phenomenon, one that brings men and women together in embrace and affection. In some haunting way it is also a divine phenomenon, an element attested to by the praise of the god Eros offered in the *Symposium*. How fortunate we are that this chance convergence of poetry and philosophy is brought about by encomia of love, speeches of praise in which each speaker will give expression to that combination of the mysterious and divine as he understands it. We will get a glimpse into the tastes and opinions concerning many types of love, and with this glimpse will come the necessary yet pleasant task of evaluating both attraction and attachment.

The setting of the *Symposium* plays an important role in the movement of the dialogue’s drama, much as it did in both the *Clouds* and the *Apology*. All of Plato’s dialogues are set within a framework that sheds light on the speeches contained within, and the *Symposium* makes clear the importance of this framework from the very beginning. The *Symposium* is the only Platonic dialogue whose title refers to an event or occasion.\(^1\) It draws attention to its setting, and in its description:

\(^1\)“The *Symposium*, at any rate, is the only dialogue whose title designates an occasion . . . Symposia give rise to play and jokes, but at the same time they are susceptible of noble speeches. There are other human gatherings which are not so likely to give rise to delicate and noble speeches. You would have to reflect about the medium of symposia, which is wine, and the effects of wine.” Leo Strauss, *On Plato’s Symposium* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 12.
own way, emphasizes its importance more so than most of its sister dialogues. Instead of bearing the name of a person, such as the *Phaedrus* or *Gorgias*, or that of a subject or thing, such as the *Republic* or *Laws*, the *Symposium* is about a banquet, a meeting of the minds or melding of the souls that takes place and is of significance. In likeness it is most akin to the *Apology* whose title indicates a subject that is unintelligible without its setting, yet the differences between the two are striking. These differences are important to keep in mind as we transition from one to the other.

As we noted, the *Apology* was a compulsory dialogue; Socrates’ attendance in its dramatic setting is not negotiable. He is required by the city to give a public account of himself, one that will answer the charges brought against him. The *Symposium*, however, is not compulsory. It is just the opposite – a voluntary expression of opinions and feelings that are given freely and privately. As a voluntary dialogue, the *Symposium* allows us to move within a realm of freedom, unknown in dialogues such as the *Apology*. We are far from the crowd of jurors who pronounced judgment on Socrates’ fate, and from the harsh laws that ultimately spelled the end of his philosophizing. Instead, this occasion will be a chance gathering of friends, a gentile and privileged banquet to praise the recent victory of the tragic poet Agathon who figures prominently in the dialogue’s drama. It will also be an occasion where the group will sing the praises of eros, giving expression to and justification for their opinions and tastes in openness, and at times, with frankness. Such a gathering is not so fanciful as to escape our own
contemporary experiences; who has not had the opportunity at one time or another to gather with his closest friends and, after having consumed the celebratory sustenance and spirits that attend to such occasions, felt free to give frank expression to his innermost thoughts. Men still gather together to celebrate and rejoice in much the same ways as in the Symposium, and when they do, what is most important to them will often be at the center of the conversation.

The commonness of the experience is what binds us to the dialogue – what makes it intelligible to us as vicarious revelers. But the setting is also unique, which must be kept in mind if we are to transcend our own experiences. This gathering is special, for in it we have an impressive collection of individuals, a veritable who’s who of Athenian intellectual life.2 We are able to sneak a glimpse into a very exclusive gathering, one where several prominent Athenians will drop their public veneers and social inhibitions to expose their secret yet truest opinions on love. This is no gathering of average men: a prominent physician, the greatest classical comic poet, the latest successor in the long line of venerable tragic poets, and our enigmatic philosopher, to name only a few, will speak openly about their desires, letting all of us see publicly what can only be said privately with propriety. In a way, this voluntary private setting is necessary to

2“These revelers are, of course, not just anybodies. They include Aristophanes and Socrates, who need no introduction, as well as Agathon, the brightest light among the tragic poets who succeeded Sophocles and Euripides. And then there is the dramatic entry of the great Alcibiades. The others are worthy, if not world-historical personages. This is what Athens could offer in its unrivaled moment, which still fascinates mankind.” Allan Bloom, “The Ladder of Love,” Symposium, trans. Seth Benardete. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 70.
the subject matter, as Socrates has already told us that there is a inevitable tension between the truth, which is essentially a private matter, and what can be said and done publicly.\textsuperscript{3} Why this is the case is not hard to understand, as one of the Symposium’s dramatic themes, which we will be forced to deal with at some length, is the issue of pederasty. Because pederasty is intertwined not only with the issue of eros, but also that of teaching and teacher-pupil relations, one cannot help but to broach the topic. Being privy to this private conversation enables us to come closer to the speakers and their true thoughts, desires, and opinions, yet puts us further from the public, and hence propriety, if not also the law.

The second key characteristic of the Symposium is that it is narrated to us by a character within its own plot line. The story of the Symposium comes to us as a third-hand account, a tale of a banquet held many years before that is told first by one of the attendees, Aristodemus, to another follower of Socrates, Apollodorus. This Apollodorus, a rather odd figure whose personality mixes both self-loathing and the despising of others, is entreated to recount the tale once more by a mysterious comrade named Glaucon who has just heard of the gathering but assumes incorrectly that it has occurred recently. It is through the lens of Apollodorus’ account that we will hear of what transpired at the banquet, which puts our knowledge of the gathering as readers at three removes. Why Plato goes to such lengths in the Symposium to put a distance between the reader and the action of the drama is ultimately unclear, but the narrated character of

\textsuperscript{3} Cf. Apology, 31a 9 - 32a 3.
the dialogue, when understood in relation to its voluntary nature, gives us some clues that further emphasize the general importance of the drama.

Having the reader at three removes from the action of the banquet allows the author to focus the reader’s mind on what is happening in the setting of the dialogue as a whole. By emphasizing the greater distance between the reader and the action of the play, Plato gets us to pay attention to that distance, and ask what significance it has. True, the *Symposium* is voluntary, which means its action is freer and less inhibited than the action in a compulsory dialogue. Narrating the dialogue at three removes in time also has a liberating effect, as it allows the author to treat what might have been a sensitive subject once with more candor at a later point. In important ways, the *Symposium*’s voluntary and narrated character go hand-in-hand, as it allows sensitive topics such as eros and pederasty to be dealt with as openly as the subject matter will permit. Its candor is then a necessary illusion, one that makes frankness possible through distance and distance possible through frankness.

The setting of the banquet is at the same time also foreboding, and one can see how removing the reader from the action three time over both insulates us and draws our attention to that setting. The dramatic action of the *Symposium* takes place roughly around 416, a time in Athenian history not unimportant to its strange setting. Allan Bloom emphasizes this importance with these remarks:

The dates indicated by the speakers in the dialogue teach us something about what is going on in it. The date of the *Symposium* itself is indicated to be around 416 B.C., at the last moment of Athenian splendor. The victory of Agathon in the contest at the Lenaean Festival seemed to
provide a continuation of the tradition of tragic poetry in the person of this attractive youth. And Athens itself was about to undertake the Sicilian expedition, the most splendid imperial exercise yet to be projected by the Athenians, under the instigation and leadership of Alcibiades. . . Just prior to the departure of the force, with its leadership divided between the radical Alcibiades and the conservative Nicias, a typical and self-destructive compromise made by the people, Alcibiades was accused of having mutilated the statues of Hermae, religious statues scattered about Athens, and the profanation of the Mysteries, the most sacred and secret Athenian religious rite. The truth or falsehood of these charges is unknowable. But like Socrates, Alcibiades enjoyed a very bad reputation and his life was surrounded by rumors. He too seemed a threat to the democracy, although he was also at times its darling, as Socrates never was.4

It is not difficult to see how the banquet, with its elite attendance and powerful subject matter, could be looked upon with suspicion, regardless of what was truly said or done. That the action of the Symposium is circumscribed by a setting of defeat and treachery portends a disquieting aura around its action. The connection between the open and frank speeches about love and the demise of Athenian military and political power is alarming in anticipation and tragic in hindsight, regardless of how vague and underdeveloped that connection is. We are reminded, as we were

4Allan Bloom, “The Ladder of Love,” pp. 71-72. There is considerable debate over the dramatic setting of the dialogue. Leo Strauss places the retelling of the story at 407 after Alcibiades’ exoneration (On Plato’s Symposium, p. 24), while Martha Nussbaum, and following her James Rhodes, places it at 404 after Alcibiades’ death (Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 170); James Rhodes, Eros, Wisdom, and Silence (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 2003), p. 190). It is likely that the date of the dialogue is in fact 405, as it would account for the many (i.e., at least three) years Agathon had been removed to Macedonia, beginning roughly around 408. It also provides a setting in which the ominous event of 416 could be retold with clear memory, yet without the hysteria or death of Alcibiades’ present in the background. Nussbaum and Rhodes impute a great deal of significance to Alcibiades’ death, which is unfortunate, as the opening of the dialogue makes no reference to it. For reasons of theoretical parsimony, it is unnecessary to add this historical contour when the dialogue does not in one way or another point toward it. And regardless of the date set for the retelling of the story, the internal date of the banquet is not a matter of dispute; all recognize the banquet took place in 416.
when we first approached the *Clouds* and the *Apology*, that the implications of this night’s discussion will be intensely political.

Before moving to the speeches themselves, a few final remarks on the *Symposium’s* setting are in order. First, as we have noted, the *Symposium* is narrated by the rather odd Apollodorus as a story he once heard from Aristodemus. The transmission of the happenings that night many years ago is had through the gossip of one student of Socrates to another. Our lens through which we view the drama of the *Symposium* is the admittedly porous memories of two faithful students, students who each in his own way adds something to the drama of the dialogue. This fact cannot help but to draw our attention to the characters of these two men, and indirectly, to the character of their teacher. Our self-loathing narrator has been shown his own worthlessness by none other than Socrates, to the effect that he is miserable with his own condition and despises all others who think themselves worthier and happier than in truth they are. Apollodorus’ experience with Socrates has not made him self-sufficient and content; quite the opposite, his soul is tormented and perplexed by that which it cannot understand yet needs

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5Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 180 c1 - 3, and 178a1-3. Allan Bloom also makes this interesting point about the narration of the *Symposium*: “And, as among Socrates’ disciples in the *Clouds*, who say that his teachings are secret but blabber about them to anyone who comes to the Think Tank, the security arrangements here are porous. Whoever knows the story, repeats its. Socrates’ lovers are proselytizers.” Bloom, “The Ladder of Love,” p. 71.
most urgently. At least in this early example, Socrates’ influence on his student has not been for the better.

Secondly, Apollodorus’ source, Aristodemus, is equally as strange, but his strangeness is to be found more in what he resembles than his disposition. Aristodemus attends the banquet at Agathon’s house at the request of Socrates, not having received a formal invitation himself. The dialogue draws our attention to this odd pairing, for Aristodemus is invited to the gathering by our Socrates who was “. . . freshly bathed and wearing fancy slippers, which was not Socrates’ usual way.” Today Socrates will leave behind his pauper appearance and groom himself in a manner befitting a noble man; for this occasion Socrates has taken note of his surroundings and adapted himself to their demands. Yet his disciple Aristodemus, the “Kydathenean, little and always unshod,” is the one who more resembles the traditional image of Socrates. And in his

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6“Now, in spite of his constantly hearing speeches about philosophy, Apollodorus is cursed, most unhappy. His turn to philosophy three years ago, when he met Socrates for the first time, has transformed his wretchedness, of which he did not know, into complete misery, of which he knows. In other words, he is not exactly a model of happiness.” Strauss, *On Plato’s Symposium*, p 22.


8 *Symposium*, 173b2-3. “On this day Aristodemus resembles Socrates more than Socrates does, for Aristodemus is barefoot. Socrates says that he is on his way to Agathon’s for the second night of the celebration, having missed the first night for fear of the mob, and has dolled himself up to be beautiful for his beautiful host. Socrates is ordinarily the virtuoso of the good and the useful, but tonight is dedicated more to the beautiful than the good. So we find an adorned Socrates, perhaps a less authentic one, as he approaches the question of Eros, which has much more to do with the beautiful than the good. What is the relation between these two things? Man responds to two different and powerful appeals in the good and the beautiful, and this
resemblance, this Aristodemus, the one who “. . . was most in love with Socrates at that time,”
also better fits our description of Socrates as the consummate lover, the one more concerned with
the object of his affection than with himself.9 In a strange way, this new Socrates has become
beautiful but also has become the beautiful object of affection, not the erotic pursuer. We must
keep this in mind as we venture forth into the speeches to see if, and if so how, this new Socrates
fits together with what we will learn about eros.

Finally, this banquet is curiously abstracted from in such a way that it gives us pause if
only because it reminds us of what is missing. We will hear seven speeches that are either
directly or indirectly about eros. One would expect that, given the great diversity of speeches and
personalities, the subject would be covered in its entirety, leaving no loose end untied. But the
banquet starts off strangely, where the men – and one must never forget that this is a gathering of
only men – decide to have their discussions in private, thereby dismissing “. . . the flute girl who
just came in and to let her flute for herself, or, if she wants, for the women within, while we
consort with each other today through speeches.”10 The setting for the discussion of eros will
have no women present, nor will it be adorned by the delicate harmony of music. This is
seemingly no mistake, for, with the possible exception of Aristophanes*, there will be no

9Ibid., 173b4.

10Ibid., 176e5-7.
encomium of eros that takes its bearings from the attraction that men and women feel toward one another. On one level this is understandable given the need for frankness and the delicateness surrounding the issue of pederasty. But on another level, one cannot help but be taken aback by such an oversight, given that the passion men and women feel towards one another must surely be the most common, if not the most intense, form of eros available to human beings. We must keep all of these elements of the setting in mind as we proceed to the speeches with the hope that they might shed light on the issues we are sure to face.

The First Speakers: Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus

It is true that we look to the Symposium because it alone of the Platonic dialogues has both Aristophanes and Socrates as characters in its action. This fits perfectly with the needs of our investigation, as a meeting of the two men occasioned by a discussion of eros is precisely the material needed to further the dialogue between the poet and the philosopher. Aristophanes and Socrates are not the first and only speakers, however, and thus there are several speeches whose importance must be covered if we are to understand correctly the dimensions of our debate. Three speakers precede the speech given by Aristophanes – Phaedrus, Pausanias, and Eryximachus – and while it is not our intention here to give comprehensive accounts of their speeches, a little must nevertheless be said about their importance.

We begin at the most general level, with what is common to all. All three in their own way subordinate the phenomenon of eros to something else, to some higher good. This is
important because it makes us question the relative status of eros, of just how important a phenomenon it truly is. In so doing, it also demands of us that we evaluate the experience of eros to understand how those things we desire fit within the relative hierarchy of human things.

Phaedrus, the first to offer a speech in praise of eros in the *Symposium*, does so by giving us a peculiar account that privileges not the lover, but the beloved.\footnote{Ibid., 178a6 - 180c1.} This same man, whose name is the title of another Platonic dialogue to which we will direct our attention shortly, gives an account of eros in which the beloved in the lover-beloved relationship receives the greater respect. Eros is a central part of Phaedrus’ speech, as without it the lover-beloved relationship would not be possible, but it is not the highest part, which is instead that virtue of nobility or self-sacrifice possessed by the beloved. Phaedrus’ praise of eros is thus one-sided – there is no reciprocity between lover and beloved, with the effect that the beloved is more noble and divine because he sacrifices not out of love, but nobility. This tautological argument about the nature of the beloved points to a subordination of eros on Phaedrus’ part to something else, something more akin in practice to gain. The first speech of the *Symposium* thus sets up eros as something praiseworthy only in so far as it contributes to something higher than itself.

The second speaker, Pausanias, also subordinates eros, but does so by splitting it into two, one of which is good, the other vulgar \footnote{Ibid., 180c3 - 185c4.} No action in itself is noble or base; instead its
virtue inheres in how it is performed, which also determines to which of the two erotes the action corresponds. Pausanias’ speech, among many things, is an exhortation to convince others that the law should encourage the noble expressions of eros, while punishing and thus discouraging the vulgar expressions. The noble expression, where the chief concern is the virtue of both the lover and beloved, is the perfect form of pederasty, where the man loves the boy for the sake of the virtue the boy may attain, while the boy loves the man for the sake of the wisdom the man possesses. Eros brings forth true virtue, which is to be encouraged by the city for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is its tendency to discourage tyranny. Pausanias’ praise of eros, then, is in truth a praise of virtue and law, to whose value eros is subordinated.

The third speaker is Eryximachus the physician. Eryximachus picks up on the duality of eros that Pausanias introduces, but suggests that there must be a harmony brought about between the two by some skill in uniting opposites. Like the cosmos itself, Eros is pulled apart by dualities, whether that be love and strife, full and empty, or sickness and health, and it is the role of art in general, and medicine in particular, to bring about the unity of these opposites. Art holds the cosmos together, and medicine, its archetypical expression, likewise holds eros and the human being together. Eryximachus’ speech is really a praise of art, as it prioritizes that which

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13Ibid., 185e5.
binds over that which is attracted or even repelled. The physician makes his art into a cosmic principle with the effect that he becomes the most indispensable member present.\textsuperscript{14}

That the three initial speakers in the \textit{Symposium} all subordinate eros to something higher than itself is clear. Why is this important? Those who do not subordinate eros must have their say before we know the nature for the distinction, but whatever the reason, it must have something to do with the status of eros in human life. Nevertheless, these speakers add something important to the dialogue as a whole, and thus to our interest in particular. Phaedrus is the first to establish the link between eros and politics. Phaedrus’ speech connects what we have seen before with what we seek currently – the reason for which Socrates failed to have a compelling attachment to his city. Eros, according to this first speech, is one of the greatest and most honorable of all the gods, and this because he is one of the oldest; “. . . Eros was a great and wondrous god among human beings as well as gods, and that this was so in many respects and not least in the matter of birth. For the god to be ranked among the oldest is a mark of honor . . .”\textsuperscript{15} To be old is to be good, and Eros, being among the oldest of gods is also among the greatest. This god’s gifts to mankind bind men together through nobility, and hence, politically; “it is

\textsuperscript{14}One must remember that it is Eryximachus who lays down the ground rules for the banquet (177d1 - 5), as well as the one who in turn enforces those rules (185d4 - e4 and 214b9 - 214c6).

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 178a7-178b2.
shame in the face of shameful things and honorable ambition in the face of beautiful things; for without them neither city nor private person can accomplish great and beautiful deeds.”

It is not surprising this young man enamored with praise and beautiful self-sacrifice should be the first to establish eros in the political realm. Phaedrus is a lover not of men as much as of admiration; he is the beloved in a non-reciprocal erotic relationship. He tells the audience that Eros, the oldest of gods, is related to human eros through our longing for honor and avoidance of shame. His tale promotes nobility, whose selflessness elevates beautiful self-forgetting in the face of death without ulterior motives. Such nobility is political at the highest level, which is why Phaedrus’ speech speaks of the good Eros provides in terms of war:

So if there were any possibility that a city or an army could be composed of lovers and beloveds, then there could be no better way for them to manage their own city; for they would abstain from all that is shameful and be filled with love of honor before one another. And besides, were they to do battle alongside one another, then even a few of this sort would win over just about all human beings; for a real man in love would of course far less prefer to be seen by his beloved than by all the rest when it comes to deserting his post or throwing away his weapons; he would choose to be dead many times over before that happened.

Phaedrus’ tale also praises the virtue of shame, that feeling of guilt or dishonor brought about when one fails to perform those duties that are required. By bringing in all of these themes — honor, nobility, and shame — Phaedrus establishes a relationship of which even he may be unaware. Even though he has subordinated eros to virtue, a move that makes it difficult to judge

\[16\] Ibid., 178d1-3.

\[17\] Ibid., 178e3-179a6.
eros as anything other than a love of gain, Phaedrus has unwittingly shown an element of self-sacrifice in eros that is both noble and necessary to politics.

Pausanias’ speech adopts the link established between eros and politics by Phaedrus, but goes further in developing the specifics of this relationship. In the *Apology*, Socrates attempted to defend himself against the charge of corrupting the youth. Pausanias helps us to engage again this line of thought, for it is Pausanias who is concerned with eros’ relationship to the law because of his concern with the practice of pederasty. Pausanias is a pederast, and he seeks to win approval for his practice by emphasizing its benefits while condemning its vulgar practice. Pausanias seeks for the law to protect pederasty, which he assures will help inculcate virtue in the souls of the young and strengthen the foundations of the polity; “In order to give respectability to his claim about the public utility of such friendships, he uses the old Athenian story, dear to the democratic faction, about how Harmodius and Aristogeiton, beloved and lover, destroyed the Pisistratid tyranny.”¹⁸ The concern with the political effects of pederasty is reminiscent of Socrates who himself frequented the circles of young boys, and who was convicted of corrupting the youth. Socrates’ relationship with younger boys, a relationship most analogous to that between teacher and pupil, is prefigured in the notion of pederasty because both deal with men and boys who seek different things and thus have different motivations. In

the end, Pausanias is never able to give a compelling argument in support of pederasty, but he nonetheless establishes Socrates’ relationship with the youth as an erotic problem.

The first two speakers, Phaedrus and Pausanias, draw attention to the problems associated with Socrates. One’s relationship to one’s city and to one’s students is an erotic relationship, and thus the problem of Socrates is in reality an erotic problem. The third speaker, Eryximachus, gives us more evidence that we are on the right track by praising in speech what we have seen Socrates accused of in deed. Aristophanes was to be the third speaker, but because of a strange bout of hiccups, the comic and the physician must exchange places.\textsuperscript{19} As a physician, Eryximachus is concerned with art:

\begin{quote}
And in general, in music, in medicine, and in all other things – the human and the divine – each Eros must be watched as far as practicable; for both of the Erotes are present in these things. The composition of the seasons of the year, for example, is also full of both these Erotes; and whenever the hot and the cold, and the dry and the moist, which I mentioned before, obtain decent love for each other and accept a moderate harmony and mixture, they come bearing good seasonableness and health to human beings and to the rest of the animals and plants and commit no injustice. But whenever Eros with his hybris proves to be too strong with regard to the seasons of the year, he corrupts and commits injustice against many things.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19}Symposium, 185c6 - e4. Why did Plato feel the need to upset his own storyline? Hiccups are convulsions of the body but which are not controlled by the body. We can say loosely that they are the quintessential expression of what we would call bodily, as it is an occasion where the body itself is overtaken and directed by its own stirrings. If the reader takes a moment to imagine this scene occurring in real life, or even on stage, he can see just how unusual such a scene truly is. Aristophanes’ hiccups are then ridiculous, an altogether proper tribute set upon the great comic himself. Moreover, by reminding us of the body and its needs, Arisophanes’ hiccups cast a long shadow of disparagement on what will follow.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 188a1-188b1.
Eryximachus views things materially, i.e. in terms of bodies, and thinks that his understanding can account not only for the whole of the universe, but also afford him control of that whole. In a way, this physician mirrors the caricature of Socrates we saw in the *Clouds*. There Socrates was shown to understand the cosmos materially, an understanding that allowed him to manipulate a great many things, such as speech. By having the comic poet switch places with the physician because of a bout of hiccups, Plato plays a very great joke on us. The *Symposium* demonstrates that Plato too could write comedy; by inserting humor in front of his own caricature, Plato acknowledges both the humor of and his debt to the *Clouds*. Even a dialogue whose theme is so profoundly serious can not escape the necessity of levity.

Socrates’ materialism was not the fundamental problem in the *Clouds*, however, and thus we are not surprised that Plato’s response is to create his own caricature that resembles Aristophanes’ in principle but not in person. Such a view as this is proper to a physician, but not to Socrates. Eryximachus was correct that there must be something that unites all things together, but that principle is not found by reducing all things to bodies. No, the soul has its due, and Socrates certainly recognizes this. It is altogether proper that Plato puts this speech in the mouth of Eryximachus the physician; such a speech is the logical conclusion of making an art such as medicine into the highest principle. Doing so, however, shows us the limitations of subordinating eros, and thus points us toward a new beginning. Eros must be considered not as subordinate to some other end, but as a phenomenon in its own right, with claims to what is most
high on its own terms. It is also with this new set of priorities that we engage again our debate, for Aristophanes and Socrates are the men we set out to find, and not coincidentally they are two of our speakers who do not subordinate eros. It is fitting that a caricature of his play gives way to the speech of Aristophanes himself, the one who will give voice to what it is that men most urgently need, and hence in what way Socrates is most manifestly lacking.

Aristophanes’ Speech: The Love of One’s Own

Before going any further, it is necessary to say a little about what is meant by eros that is not subordinated. Eros is a peculiar aspect of human nature, at once both the most accessible and the least coherent of phenomena. When we speak of eros, it is generally in reference to erotic things, to those things that conjure up feelings and images of passion. Such things are not hard to find, as contemporary society is rife with symbols and speeches that express in one form or another the importance of eros to mankind. These erotic things are only erotic, however, because they excite within us feelings of longing and neediness that are most often connected with

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21In his re-evaluation of Freud, Herbert Marcuse offers a structural analysis of eros that attempts to explain the increasing prevalence of eroticism in mainstream culture; “Not until the late stage of industrial civilization, when the growth of productivity threatens to overflow the limits set by repressive domination, has the technique of mass manipulation developed an entertainment industry which directly controls leisure time, or has the state directly taken over the enforcement of such controls.” Marcuse, Eros and Civilization (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 48. The erotic diversions are meant to reenforce society’s repression of eros such that they pacify man who, thanks to the increase in leisure time brought about by advanced capitalism, would otherwise be left to himself and his own eroticism. From this analysis, one should expect to see the symbols and dominate themes in the cultures of the advanced economies becoming increasingly sexual in nature.
the urges of the body. Eros has a very strong connection to the body, one so powerful that we are inclined to think that the truest and most perfect form of eros is that which attracts us toward other human bodies, and hence toward sexuality.

But it would be a mistake to think of eros as merely bodily, just as it would be incorrect to consider it abstracted from the body. No body ever exists without a soul, which is why even the most basic and vulgar expressions of eros must be attended to by some articulation of beauty, no matter how petty.22 One cannot possibly understand eros if by eros one means merely sex. Copulation is an activity that is shared amongst all the animals, but humans alone are in possession of, or possessed by, eros. Only among human beings does one find copulation attended to by speeches, by deeds, by praise, by a diversity of practices, and by the variety of accouterments that enhance those practices. In a way, as bodily as eros appears on the surface, it is utterly unimaginable to think of eros as being primarily bodily. It is doubtful whether the sufficient condition for the act of sex is ever another body in itself.23

22 Paul Ludwig articulates this nicely using an interesting analogy; “In one anecdote, an art teacher had his male students paint studies of a female model completely nude. As this produced no perturbation in the students, he assayed an experiment at the next session, dressing the same model in nothing but stockings. The effect on his class was immediate and disruptive.” Paul Ludwig, Eros and Polis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p 299.

23 “Clothed bodies are on average more attractive than nude ones. Eros only thinks it wants the naked truth. Seeing what is actually under the clothes spoils the ideal that the lover believed was there. Imagination supplies a better erotic stimulus than seeing the reality does. It follows that one function of clothing is to beautify the body, not only in the sense of ornamentation, but also by simply covering body parts in order that they may be imagined as more attractive than they are. One can appear more sexually appealing by covering up.” Ibid.
But to think of a soul without its body is to think of something that is no longer human, something which has no grounding in the everyday world. Just as the sufficient condition of eros is beauty in one form or another, its necessary condition must surely be a bodily urge. Can eros really be understood otherwise? Eros is that distinctive aspect of mankind whereby the soul and the body are both present, where each expresses its needs in some relation to the other. Understanding how this occurs is by no means an easy task, as it involves thinking through all the possibilities for fulfilment offered to man with an eye to what most truly fulfills his neediness. Yet it is necessary if we are to understand what Socrates longed for and how that longing might be evaluated properly. The first step is to think of eros as a very real, very powerful feeling that is present in all mankind, and not to subordinate that feeling to some other end. Eros is its own phenomenon, and its fulfilment is its own goal, one not to be understood as a secondary concern. We begin by elevating eros such that its fulfilment becomes our sole concern. This is precisely what the next three speakers do, and it is why our search turns to them. It is oddly fitting that the first of these speakers is the man whose comedy hides what might be the most powerful encomium to eros ever known.

“The comic speech of Aristophanes in the Symposium (189c-193d) is a masterpiece that shows as clearly as anything the level of Plato’s literary genius. He puts into the mouth of the greatest of all comic poets a speech that is at least worthy of Aristophanes and perhaps, in the
brilliance of its invention, surpasses anything Aristophanes could have done.” This is very high praise indeed for our comic poet, but praise that is well deserved. Aristophanes’ speech has been an inspiration to many throughout the years, and to this day guides our way of thinking more than we often recognize. Its power comes from its sincerity, from a core that refuses to mistake the trees for the forest:

Aristophanes’ is the first speech in the Symposium that gives an erotic account of Eros. He, unlike his predecessors, describes embraces and orgasms. They are what Eros is about and are splendid as ends in themselves. The other speakers were afraid to say any such thing. He is all

24 Bloom, “The Ladder of Love,” pp. 103-104. Consider also what George Anastaplo has to say about Aristophanes’ speech: “It was Aristophanes who made what most readers would consider the most memorable speech during the evening of talk recalled in the Symposium. This is appropriate in that he is the greatest artist present. Aristophanes’ ‘argument’ shows a critical relation between the shape that bodies have and the passions that human beings are driven by. Again and again, that is, the poet argues that bodies do matter – and that philosophers, in being oblivious to the demands as well as the allure of bodies, are not of this world, sometimes irresponsibly so.” George Anastaplo, The Thinker as Artist (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997), p. 174.

25 Paul Ludwig’s comments about Plato and Freud on this point are insightful; “To demonstrate just one more modern parallel: the similarities between Aristophanes’ myth and Freud’s account of the origin of theism are striking. Before the first murder, Freud theorizes that the clan worshiped an animal deity, a nature god who proved insufficient to prevent the murder, just as the circle-people’s cosmic gods were insufficient. The rebellion in Freud is by brothers who band together to kill their oppressive father. This act calls an anthropomorphic god into existence: the emotional reaction to their deed causes the brothers to deify the dead man or make him into a totem. The new deity presided over a new law, the first law; Thou shalt not kill. Freud’s god springs into being in the minds of the brothers when in revulsion, they lay down a law on themselves not to kill again. Similarly, in the Symposium speech, the Olympians spring into being in answer to the first crime, which likewise includes patricide.” Ludwig, Eros and Polis, pp. 95-96. Consider also his parallels between Plato and Freud on pp. 223-4.
erotic and shows why men, with their squirmings and their grunts and their sweating and all the rest, are doing the best possible thing, the thing that most expresses their nature.\textsuperscript{26}

In a way we understand why the comic had to be introduced by a bout of hiccups, for it was a particularly humorous yet poignant interruption of the body. Aristophanes’ speech draws attention to the body by expressing eros in terms that are dear to the body. It reminds us what an abstract discussion of eros is apt to forget: eros is first and foremost connected to the body. When we speak of love, we most often speak of embrace and passion, connection and attraction, or any number of things whose very mention is immediately recognizable to common opinion and experience. Any true account of eros must speak first and foremost to what is most commonly experienced, what is felt most earnestly and deeply.

Aristophanes begins by telling a fanciful tale of man’s nature, both as it is now and as it once was. Man was not always as he is today; once he was a mighty being whose very nature resembled the cosmic gods themselves:

Our nature in the past was not the same as now but of a different sort. First of all, the races of human beings were three, not two as now, male and female; for there was also a third race that shared in both, a race whose name still remains, though it itself has vanished. . . Secondly, the

\textsuperscript{26}Bloom, “The Ladder of Love,” p 105. Not all commentators regard Aristophanes’ speech as highly as does Bloom. Take, for instance, Nalin Ranasinghe, whose commentary on the \textit{Symposium} is markedly more critical of Aristophanes: “Many close readers of the dialogues prefer to believe that Socrates was chastised and corrected by the encounter with Aristophanes that is chronicled in the comedian’s unsuccessful play \textit{The Clouds}. An unprejudiced reading of the \textit{Symposium}, however, reveals the fundamental weakness and absurdity of Aristophanic antihumanism.” Nalin Ranasinghe, \textit{The Soul of Socrates} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 108-9. The confidence of Ranasinghe’s approach, however, is due not so much to its lack of prejudice as to its inability to parse history from poetry, and hence, it becomes stuck in its own self-referential logic.

156
looks of each human being were as a whole round, with back and sides in a circle. . . It is for this reason that the races were three and of this sort: because the male was in origin the offspring of the sun; the female, of the earth; and the race that shared in both, of the moon – since the moon also shares in both. And they themselves were globular, as was their manner of walking, because they were like their parents. 27

Man’s original nature is traced back to his cosmic parents, with whom he shared both likeness and disposition. He was circular, i.e., a whole, and was self-sufficient, needing neither companionship nor attachment. Original man was thus unerotic, having none of the typical feelings that accompany beings who are in need of others to satisfy and fulfil themselves.

Original man also had no need of the Olympian gods, or those gods who show concern for man as distinguished from the cosmic gods who do not. Hence, all was not well with original man in relation to the Olympian gods, as is evidenced by the emergence of his erotic nature. With his self-sufficiency and wholeness, original man mimicked his parents, and in so doing, invoked the ire of the Olympian gods; “Now, they were awesome in their strength and robustness, and they had great and proud thoughts, so they made an attempt on the gods. And what Homer says about Ephialtes and Otus, is said about them – that they attempted to make an ascent into the sky with a view to assaulting the gods.”28 In his attempt to be more like his parents, original man mounted a rebellion against the Olympian gods, a rebellion that required of the Olympians a very delicate decision; “And they were long perplexed, for the gods knew neither how they could kill them and (just as they had struck the giants with lightning) obliterate the race – for, in that case, their own

27 Symposium, 189d6 - 190b5.

28 Ibid., 190b5 - 7.
honors and sacrifices from human being would vanish – nor how they could allow them to continue to behave licentiously.”

Being whole like his parents, original man had no reason to bow before the Olympian gods. Yet the inverse is not true, for the Olympian gods were very much in need of man, if only for the sake of his sacrifices. The decision bringing about man’s eroticism is an odd dynamic, one both humorous and intriguing.

Man’s original state is one with no lack; he is in need of nothing to make him whole. This includes providence, which suggests that his subjugation to the will of the gods is neither natural nor wholly just. In response to man’s rebellion, Zeus devises a plan to make man needy, and hence dependent on the Olympian gods. His answer to man’s rebellion against the rule of the Olympians is to cut man in half, to sever his wholeness with a view to subjugating him; “‘I have a device whereby human beings would continue to exist and at the same time, having become weaker, would stop their licentiousness. I shall cut each of them in two,’ he said; ‘and they will be both weaker and more useful to us through the increase in their numbers.”

Man’s current form is the result of this cut that made two out of one, thereby mutilating our original nature for the sake of the Olympian’s order. Man as he is today is only a shade of his former self, one that has been maimed for the sake of the gods’ well being, not his own.

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29Ibid., 190c3 - 7.

30Ibid., 190c8 – 190d3.

31On this point, consider Arlene Saxonhouse’s provocative reading: “In their completion and fullness they no longer need the gods as the mortals of later time, those to whom
Eros emerges as a result of this cut, as a longing for our other half together with whom we where whole. When we speak of eros, we speak of yearning, of a force the compels us toward another in whose embrace we experience that sense of completeness that was so unjustly stolen from us by the gods. Yet this is not the end of the story, as Zeus’ plan was a failure in that his efforts to subjugate us almost destroyed us. So powerful is this force known as eros in man that, “when its nature was cut in two, each – desiring its own half – came together; and throwing their arms around one another and entangling themselves with one another in their desire to grow together, they began to die off due to hunger and the rest of their inactivity, because they were unwilling to do anything apart from one another.”32 In his attempts to ensure obedience and sacrifice, Zeus nearly destroyed those very things by destroying man, not knowing how powerful his drive to reunite would be. Zeus is forced to devise still another plan, one that

Aristophanes speaks, shall. Wholeness opens the door for impiety because it raises the question of our need for the divinities. When men are partial, piety re-enters as a confirmation of our inadequacy and dependence on others. Pride comes from the arrogance of completion, not from a sense of inadequacy and it is this pride that leads the ancient beings to contemplate an attack on the gods. They do not attack the gods because they desire to have what the gods have. They rise up because their completion engender arrogance.” In a note to this point, Saxonhouse further speculates that, “We cannot here ignore the question of Socratic piety – the completion which Socrates achieves prepares him to revolt against the Olympian gods. Consider how Socrates is called arrogant (hubristic) in this dialogue (175e2; 215b7; 219c5), how impervious he is to Alcibiades’ affections, and how in this dialogue he claims to know (177d6-7).” Arlene Saxonhouse, “The Net of Hephaestus: Aristophanes’ Speech in Plato’s Symposium,” Interpretation, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January, 1985), p. 22.

32 Symposium, 191a4 - 8.
induce men to turn their attentions away from their yearnings and toward their dependence on the gods. His answer to this is simple; he gives man sexuality:

He rearranges their genitals toward the front – for up till then they had them on the outside, and they generated and gave birth not in one another but in the earth, like cicadas – and for this purpose, he changed these part of them toward the front, and by this means made generation possible in one another, by means of the male in the female; so that in embracing, if a man meets with a woman, they might generate and the race continue; and if male meets with male, there might at least be satiety in their being together; and they might pause and turn to work and attend to the rest of their livelihood.33

In order for the human race to survive and be obedient, it must be given sexuality and civilized. Sexuality and the family contribute to what is distinctively human in man’s nature, but they are contributions that come with a heavy price; “The eros, unintentionally generated by Zeus’ punitive measures, has no connection with the activities usually associated with sexual love. On the contrary, sexual intercourse and reproduction are devised by Zeus expressly to take man’s mind off the serious concern of eros, since that concern precluded piety.”34

Summarizing Aristophanes’ encomium on eros begins with what is most obvious. Eros, in it basic and common form, is a longing for wholeness, a yearning for completion. This yearning is in a way very bodily – we long to be forever in the arms of the one we love, to never cease feeling the sweet rapture that attends so naturally to love’s embrace. It is in the arms of our beloved that we regain our wholeness and for a moment, if only a fleeting moment, experience

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33Ibid., 191b6 - 191c8. Notice that Aristophanes’ language clearly separates eros from sexuality, making the latter wholly dependent on the former.

that self-sufficiency that was once rightly ours. But Aristophanes, as beautifully and passionately as he describes this blessed union, is no romantic. There is no hope that this bodily embrace can or will last forever, nor that the momentary self-forgetting that occurs during our amorous grasping will forever heal our ancient wound. No, love will not conquer all; in fact, it can conquer very little. What we now long for in theory was taken away as a possibility in practice long ago. If not at first, the true halves eventually died off, leaving only dismembered men as their progeny. Man as he is now is the offspring of the gods’ tyranny, longing for but not having a true other half. That which we long for cannot be possessed; instead, we are given only brief respite from our suffering. Those things to which we affix the label erotic today are merely shadows of what we really want; in them one finds only a bagatelle that is meant to makes us obedient and prosperous by distracting us from what is truly our own.35

The beauty and sobriety of Aristophanes’ encomium speaks powerfully about eros – it is a phenomenon at once both comic and tragic, both ordinary and sublime. It sums up exactly what we feel when we experience eros. It articulates what everyone who has ever been in love, young or old, has felt when they first set their gaze upon that certain someone. The comic’s speech does justice to the body’s experience of eros without reducing that expression to vulgar

35Such sentiments have amazing resilience, even if in otherwise unpoetic packaging: “Scientific management of instinctual needs has long since become a vital factor in the reproduction of the system: merchandise which has to be bought and used is made into objects of the libido; and the national Enemy who has to be fought and hated is distorted and inflated to such an extent that he can activate and satisfy aggressiveness in the depth dimensions of the unconscious.” Marcuse, Eros and Civilization, xii.
copulation; “and here you have those who continue through life with one another, though they
could not even say what they want to get for themselves from one another. For no one would be
of the opinion that it was sexual intercourse that was wanted, as though it were for this reason –
of all things – that each so plainly wants something else.”36 Eros may be first and foremost
bodily, but that does not mean it is primarily sexual.37

Despite all of its power, passion and sublimity, Aristophanes’ speech teaches a very
dark lesson about what can be expected in terms of human fulfilment, a lesson that at once
reminds us of our current purposes. Eros’ yearning is forever unrequited, homeless in a world
that provides temporary salves and ill-fitting tourniquets. To long for wholeness is to yearn for
one’s own, for one’s other half without which true completion is impossible. It is true that the
gods in their pity gave men sex and civilization, and with these two things the powerful corollary
of the family. One’s family represents most emphatically that within which most men’s eros

36 Symposium, 192c2-7.

37 The speech also reminds us of another central aspect of erotic phenomena, one that we
must not forget. While he does trace our erotic natures back to the single act of violence inflicted
upon us by Zeus, Aristophanes does not fail to account for the diversity of erotic preferences
and practices as they are found. Man originally had three parents; sun, earth and moon, and the
decedents of each preferred their own halves made in the likeness of their cosmic parents. The
all-male and all-female pairs become what we know of today as homosexuals and lesbians
respectively, while the androgynes became what are now known as heterosexuals. Though our
eroticism is shared in common, the result of the same infliction, the half that each man longs for
depends on the cosmic god from which he has descended. Aristophanes is able to account for the
whole range of erotic preferences while dealing with eros as a single phenomenon; it is for this
reason as much as any that his speech has resonated so powerfully with lovers throughout the
years.
finds its home, and hence what is most commonly known of as one’s own. One’s mother and father, sister and brother have a special place in man’s life; they are the things that help to remind us of who we are and why we are here. The family gives meaning to our lives and grounds us in a framework that makes sense of the cosmos and our place in it. Thus, one rarely has to give a reason to defend one’s family except that it is one’s own, being first in proximity and affection. It is for this reason that familial duty and affection are those emotions that attach so naturally to the love of one’s own; these things of the hearth and home, being that out of which man emerges, is also that which he identifies with most clearly.  

But it is not always easy to connect eros to familial affection, even though it seems to fit there so perfectly. The family does fulfill needs in man’s life; it does provide an outlet to his erotic nature that allows him to exist and flourish. It was a device, however, an artifice created by Zeus to ensure our continuation and subjugation; “Marriage thus becomes sanctified by the gods as a means of keeping men from becoming too powerful. The family prevents men from uniting and threatening the gods again, from finding once again power and arrogance in unity such as their ancestors had experienced.” Eros can never be completely satisfied within the family; domesticity is not natural and does not exhaust the raw character of eros. The Olympian gods have made men in their image, but man was not meant to be like them. Zeus’ mutilation of man

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38 Strepsiades never once hesitates over the injustices that must be done to the city for the sake of the family because of this love of one’s own, however unjustified.

permanently disfigured him to the point that he can never be fully comfortable with the outlets open to his longings. The wound inflicted upon man’s nature will never heal. It is for this unsettling reason that Aristophanes gives us these lines which would otherwise be unintelligible:

Each of us, then, is a token of a human being, because we are sliced like fillets of sole, two out of one; and so each is always in search of his own token. Now all who are the men’s slice from the common genus, which was then called androgynous, are lover of women; and many adulterers have been of this genus; and in turn, all who are women of this genus prove to be lovers of men and adulteresses. And all women who are sliced off from woman hardly pay attention to men but are rather turned toward women, and lesbians (prostitutes) arise from this genus. But all who are male slices pursue the males; and while they are boys – because they are outlets of the male – they are friendly to men and enjoy lying down together with and embracing men; and these are the best of boys and lads, because they are naturally the manliest.  

With the family comes adultery, and with pederasty comes indifference; “when they are fully grown men, they are pederasts and naturally pay no attention to marriage and procreation, but are compelled to do so by the law; whereas they would be content to live unmarried with one another.”  

Man is forever bifurcated, split between that which is available to him and that for which he longs.

It is no mistake that there is a very deep, very old and very powerful kinship between the family, the city and the gods. The family is not self-sufficient for reasons not the least of which include its own particularity. The family needs other families if the consequences of eros – children – are to have homes for their eros. The insufficiency of the family points toward the self-sufficiency of the city; that the family needs others like itself requires that there be a proper

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40 Symposium, 191d3 - 192a2

41 Ibid., 192a7 - 192b3.
Thus Stanley Rosen says of Aristophanes’ poetry that, “Although two poets speak in the Symposium, only one praises justice. Aristophanes, whose business is ‘entirely with Dionysus and Aphrodite’ (177e2), represents not pure but political poetry. Unlike Agathon, Aristophanes does not praise an autonomous Eros, but one whose ‘philanthropy’ (189d1) is a consequence of the ‘medical’ techne of Zeus and Apollo. Aristophanes’ poetic techne is in the service of the Olympian gods of the city.” Stanley Rosen, Plato’s Symposium (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 121. Rosen is correct that eros is inextricably linked to the gods and their laws, but goes too far in suggesting that it is then fundamentally political. Aristophanic eros is not fundamentally political; it is not even fundamentally familial. It must become these things in due course, but that is not a course Aristophanes himself can lay out. No matter how beautiful his speech, it must be transcended by something less bodily in nature if eros is to become fully political. One this point, consider what Aristotle says in the Politics, 1262b7 - 21.

It is evident, therefore, that the city is not a partnership in a location and for the sake of not committing injustice against each other and of transacting business. These things must necessarily be present if there is to be a city, but not even when all of them are present is it yet a city, but the city is the partnership in living well both of households and families for the sake of a complete and self-sufficient life. This will not be possible, however, unless they inhabit one and the same location and make use of intermarriage. It was on this account that marriage connections arose in cities, as well as clans, festivals, and the pastimes of living together. This sort of thing is the work of affection; for affection is the intentional choice of living together.” Aristotle, Politics, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1280b29 - 39.
We could go on for countless pages examining every subtle detail of Aristophanes’ speech in an effort to develop a comprehensive account of it. Such is not our task, however. We need only determine in what ways Aristophanes’ account of eros contributes to our understanding of Socrates’ eros, whether that be adequate or deficient. In this respect we have gone far enough.

The problem of Socrates was that he was oddly if not painfully distant from what most men hold dear. To understand this properly, we needed a broader discussion of attachment to see how and why Socrates could become the subject of both a caricature and public ire. We find such a discussion in Aristophanes’ speech, for in it is a description of the eros that most men feel most of the time. Man finds erotic satisfaction, no matter how temporarily, in the immediacy of his family, and, by extension, his city. Human eros can only be temporarily sated, and this satiation is found primarily though not exclusively in one’s own family.

The solution of the problem of Socrates, at least from Aristophanes’ point of view, is that Socrates’ eros does not long for that which is available to it. Socrates apparently longs for

44 Others have argued compellingly for the congruity between Aristophanes and Plato, permitting us to use the speech the latter puts in the mouth of the former with more confidence. Take, for instance, Solomos, who writes of the two men’s relationship; “If he (Aristophanes) became the moral instigator of Socrates’ later condemnation, it was beyond his intention. Socrates was destined to serve as the scapegoat for the sins of the sophists; no one among them drank the hemlock and none even became so famous a comedy character as he. What argues for Aristophanes’ innocence of purpose is Plato’s complaisance toward him. If the playwright had been seriously responsible for the philosopher’s condemnation, Plato would not have included him, as friend among friends, in the famous Symposium, written fifteen years or so after Socrates’ death.” Alexis Solomos, The Living Aristophanes (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1974), p. 112.
something that cannot sustain him, something that offers no ease to the powerful yearning he feels. If Socrates is indifferent, we must understand that to mean he somehow does not love his own. For Socrates to be a model of citizenship, he must be a citizen of a city before a philosopher of conscience, a father of a family before a patriot of ideas. Even though these Latin analogies have no direct equivalence in Greek, these nevertheless suggest a necessary connection between the private and the public, a connection Socrates did not possess. As simplistic as such a suggestion might seem, the now evident parallel between indifference and the love of one’s own points toward a profound similarity between Aristophanes and Plato’s presentations of Socrates.

Plato’s Aristophanes articulates precisely what is lacking not only in the Socrates of the Clouds, but also of the Apology. The historical Socrates apparently had no strong sense of attachment to his family the way most citizens would have. No matter how much of an inadequate solution it is, the family is that to which most men feel most attached. To not feel that attachment is to invite not only suspicion, but also to appear ridiculous. Socrates was apparently erotically drawn to something else, something that, if we use Aristophanes’ speech as our guide, could not even temporarily fulfill his eros. It is altogether proper that our introduction to the problem of Socrates should have gone through a comedy and a trial. In both the audience is the common man, the man who feels a true attachment to his family and country. Socrates could be both funny and dangerous because the roots of both are the same. Yet something is missing if
we leave it at this, if our answer to the problem of Socrates was that he did not love his own.

While there is something very powerful in this accusation, it stands in need of something more fundamental.

If we stopped here and inquired no further, we would miss a great deal that is essential to our subject. We must ask of Aristophanes’ speech if there is not something more. We have already seen that, in many ways, Aristophanes and Socrates are not far apart. This reoccurs in the *Symposium*, as Plato shows us that the comic poet is himself very different from the common man. Aristophanes’ speech is story of love that cannot truly be fulfilled and of gods who are tyrants. This is surely not the perspective of a common man – what ordinary citizen looks at his wife and sees only a temporary means to his erotic fulfillment? And what everyday man thinks of his gods as tyrants, as the cause of his eternal suffering? Surely the comic is very distant from his audience, and even though he powerfully recounts the nature of man’s eros, he nevertheless does so in such a way as to make it unintelligible to those who experience it. He sees what most men see – a seemingly natural fit between men and women, city and country. He also sees, however, that these things that are taken to be so natural often leave men wanting more, an urge that is dangerous to the things themselves.

It is not surprising that discussions of adultery and pederasty are parts of Aristophanes’ speech; is it not the case that the passion which first brings men into the family continuous to burn brightly long thereafter? Our comic is again outside of the city, beyond the horizons within
which man exists and flourishes. He has thought through that which most men never subject to thought – the nature of his longing and the origins of this settings. Such speculations are dangerous, for to suggest the passions that give rise to the family are ultimately unfulfilled in the family is at once to disenchant through thought that which is enchanted without thought.

Aristophanes is very far indeed from hearth and home, and his description of eros condemns him as much as it does Socrates. But again he finds his way back; he realizes that man’s situation, despite its misgivings, is nevertheless his lot. Plato’s Aristophanes curbs the distance between him and his fellow men because he understands what he has come to know is his alone and is not to be shared. He is not a threat to the city because, just as he did in the Clouds, he gives a defense of the traditional that is not traditional yet nevertheless succeeds at the level of tradition. Hence, we hear him say, “and were we to hymn the god who is the cause of this we should justly hymn Eros, who at the present time benefits us the most by leading us to what is our own; and in the future he offers the greatest hopes, while we offer piety to the gods, to restore us to our ancient nature and by his healing makes us blessed and happy.”45 The family and the gods are necessary for man to live as man and not as a beast or would-be god.46 Aristophanes returns to the level of the traditional because that is all men have to give their lives meaning, and by robbing them of this, they would be robbed of their very humanity. Again, Plato’s Aristophanes, like the

45 Symposium, 193d1 - 5.

46 “One who is incapable of participating or who is in need of nothing through being self-sufficient is no part of a city, and so is either a beast or a god.” Aristotle, Politics, 1253a27 - 28.
man who authored the *Clouds*, is not indifferent. If anything he shows his eros for his own by not upsetting the tenuous structures upon which one’s own can exist.

We are forced to say that Aristophanes felt the disenchantment with tradition but was never inclined to leave behind the traditional. There are two possible reasons for this, both of which also relate to the problem of Socrates. First, one could say that Aristophanes was unaware of, or rejected the possibility that true fulfilment could transcend one’s own. Even though Socrates might have discovered what Aristophanes already knew, he still harbored a faith that his intellectual striving might fulfil him in ways that most people only dream. To this possibility our comic could only laugh, finding humor in a faith as misplaced and unsubstantiated as the piety that sustains the common man. Man must make his peace with his place in the cosmos, and this includes the discontented man, the one who recognizes that it does no one, including himself, any good to spread his discontent and disbelief. This first possibility yields a tortured but sensitive soul, one who could only make his peace with the cosmos through laughter.

The second possibility, which yields a more complex conclusion, is that no matter how high man gets, no matter how far above convention and tradition his mind flies, his body is still grounded here on earth and still makes very great demands of him. We must remember that Aristophanes gives an account of eros that is first and foremost bodily – he emphasizes embraces and physical connections that have a very real appeal associated with them – and ties this emphasis on the body together with the love of one’s own. The love of one’s own is thus pre-
intellectual, its attachments occur naturally in correspondence with the body but without the aid of philosophy or reflection. We do not love our family for any other reason than they are our family, and this because our physical being was brought forth in and through this particular family. This is not to say that the body is abstracted from the soul, that the soul has no input in shaping the specific preferences harbored by the body, but it is to say that not every attachment and affection need be understood intellectually or through reflection. Very often one’s erotic attachments are circumscribed by the opinions of the family, and as such, are not subjected to scrutiny or analysis. Along these lines, our philosopher and comic can both look down on the family and city from a disenchanted if not disembodied perspective, but both have bodies that make their own demands. Man himself is a duality of body and soul, and one cannot be wholly indifferent to the family without in some measure also being indifferent to the demands of the body. Eros cannot be abstracted from the body, a body that is always found in particulars – in a family, and ultimately also in a city.

Aristophanes would have felt the need to curb the distance from his settings because, being a comic poet, he especially would recognize the body’s needs. Would comedy be comedy without the private movements of the body being made public? And in so far as the complete human being is in need of those things that intertwine the body and soul, our comic would have understood that only the family, the city and the gods give a home and meaning to the needs of the body. From this point of view, Aristophanes could stand apart from Socrates while standing
very near him; Aristophanes gives the body its due in a way that Socrates could or does not.

Comedy is hence not so dangerous as philosophy if only because the former assumes the body in a way the latter does not. Even though eros never finds its ultimate fulfilment within the particular, one would make an incredible mistake in thinking that the particular is unimportant. It is for this reason above all others, and for which even Plato seems eternally grateful, that the love of one’s own remains an absolutely essential part of any account of eros.

**Going Beyond One’s Own: The Recognition of the Beautiful**

Aristophanes’ speech has taught us a great deal about eros. We have seen the power that eros which is not subordinated to anything has, as well as how that power both is and is not connected to the family. The power and sobriety of his speech offers us what we have sought throughout – Socrates’ indifference, so distinctive of the character in the *Clouds* and *Apology*, is the result of an eros that somehow reduces the claims of the body, and with those claims, the love of one’s own. Even before the family, the body is what is most distinctively one’s own, and Aristophanes’ speech, when applied to our current examination, suggests that Socrates’ eros was peculiarly un-bodily. We remember the caricature that nearly drove his students to death from starvation, as well as the one who admitted his poor husbandry and ten-thousandfold poverty during the trial as examples of Socrates’ disregard for his body, and by extension, the well-being of his own friends and family.\(^{47}\) Plato’s Aristophanes is thus the perfect companion to the

\(^{47}\text{Cf. *Clouds*, 174-179 and *Apology*, 31b1-6.}\)
historical author of the *Clouds*; both warn against an abstracted eros that seeks the universal to the exclusion of the particular. We stand now, as we have before, in eager anticipation; we again wait for the response from our philosopher to the charges of our poet.

Yet such a response is not forthcoming. Instead of Socrates it is the beautiful Agathon, the victor of the recent poetic contest and host of the current night’s festivities who will speak next. Something must come between what Aristophanes has said and what Socrates will tell, and we can only surmise that it is important to understanding the dynamic between our two protagonists. We divine what this must be at a very superficial level, for it must be related to the fact that Aristophanes was a comic poet, whereas Agathon is a tragic poet. We are forced back onto Aristophanes’ speech, remembering that in our laughter and frivolity we forgot what is surely a key aspect of eros. For all of its power, Aristophanes’ speech left out something essential, something that prevents it from standing in direct opposition to Socrates. Aristophanes’ tale told us about the historical origins, about the beginnings of man’s longings and the ends of his desires. It showed how and why those things closest to us are both first for us but second in themselves; they are at the same time the strongest of human attachments and the most painful reminders of separation. What Aristophanes does not do, however, is to give the city its full credit; in his quest for comprehensiveness the comic is incapable of showing the city in its full splendor.\(^{48}\) Man does have a special attachment to the city because it is his own, an

\(^{48}\)Is the dramatic ending of the *Clouds* a sufficient testimony to the city’s brilliance?
attachment that both is and is not the product of his connection to the family. For all the power and grace that attend to his speech, Aristophanes cannot do full justice to the political; the comic must give way to someone else in order to give the polis its due. It is for this reason that Agathon must follow, for only a tragedian can succeed where the comic is incapable.

It is easy, without even reading a word of Agathon’s speech, to know what is missing. Eros might drive us toward our other half, but the other half must first be known. In a world where one’s other half is either non-existent or a mystery, eros must have some other guide against which it can hone its attraction. Simply put, can one speak of eros without discussing beauty? Despite its own internal beauty, Aristophanes never once spoke of the essential role beauty plays in eros; how does the family first form if not from the attraction sparked through beauty? This is disappointing but not unexpected; the comic as comic focuses on the body almost to the exclusion of anything else. As we said in the beginning of our examination of Aristophanes’ speech, eros is that strangely human phenomenon whereby the body and soul are both present in their mutual need of one another. Eros as eros is more than simply bodies, it also requires something higher within which the co-presence of bodies is both meaningful and fulfilling. This something is of course beauty, the sufficient condition for the actualization of love:

From this point of view what is wanting in Aristophanes’ interpretation of eros is precisely recollection of the transcendence within physis, and as this is what is ‘behind’ the power of eros, we might say that this is what he fails to see: That what is erotic is unconsciously animated by a
Aristophanes’ speech could not do justice to beauty, which is why his account of eros could not be the highest or most perfect. He needed a complement, something that fills out what he himself points to but cannot articulate. His family needed a city, which is why his comedy needed tragedy.

While it would be fruitful to treat tragedy as a separate subject for investigation, such an endeavor would be neither possible nor helpful. It suffices to say that what is most distinctive about tragedy – beauty – is also what is most lacking in comedy. It is important to remember


50In his book The Political Art of Greek Tragedy, Christian Meier asks why it was ancient Athens needed tragedy as a part of its intellectual and literary self-understanding. The answers he supplies are most useful to our study, for they point toward what is most distinctive about tragedy itself; “It seems possible that we have here a rather special example of a social body carrying out quite publicly the maintenance and development of its mental infrastructure. In the public arena of the festival the Athenians may have found an ongoing guarantee for the sort of precise balance which is so indispensable for political life. Surely we see here how the political is based within those imaginations and beliefs, within the deeper knowledge, according to which we situate our experience when we wish to be sure of it. The mental underpinning of such a daring society can certainly have been no simple matter.” Meier goes on to say that, “It seems most likely that it was essentially as citizens that the citizens saw and heard tragedies, just as it is likely that the tragedians were part of the Greek tradition of political thought, combining a healthy measure of independence with a strong authority. This need not mean that their works were consumed by politics. Nor need the tragedians have adopted a stance on topical political issues, most likely just the opposite. But the evidence certainly suggest that they did have a political function, which must warrant investigation.” Christian Meier, The Political Art of Greek Tragedy, trans. Andrew Webber (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 4-5. Those interested in the subject would do well also to consult Greek Tragedy and Political Theory, ed. J. Peter Euben
that the Greek word for beauty, *kalon*, also means noble or fair, and hence links it directly to eros and the city. What Aristophanes left out is what animates eros, what draws its attention and holds its gaze. And with that he has also left out what attends most prominently to the city, which is its nobility and sublimity. The city rises to its full prominence not only because men call it their own, but also because it makes demands on them the fulfillment of which often requires sacrifice. The political is the realm where men must sacrifice themselves for the sake of others, as Phaedrus has reminded us. These sacrifices are made possible, and with them the city itself, because such personal disregard is understood to be noble, where the good of the whole outweighs the good of the individual. This sense of being part of a greater whole, one that makes possible both life and death, is integral to the political, so much so that without it political phenomenon cease to be political. It also brings out the essential relationship between the soul and the beautiful, an aspect that Agathon will touch upon. This domain of the beautiful and the noble are the domain of the tragedian, the only man who can give voice to the absolute necessity of beauty in human life. Taken together, Aristophanes with his connections between the body and the love of one’s own, and Agathon’s partnership between the soul and the beautiful, represent a whole, one that melds body and soul, the family and the noble polity. One gives way to the other in mutual exchange; the love of one’s own is now a series of concentric circles whose overlap reflects the complex necessity found within the soul.

One other important point to note is the exchange that occurs after Aristophanes’ speech and between Agathon and Socrates. Socrates preempts Agathon’s speech, suggesting in his typically dissimulating way that he is really in a bad position by having to follow up such speeches as have come before him with Agathon’s yet to come.\footnote{Symposium, 194a1 - 4.} Agathon immediately remarks to Socrates that, “you want to bewitch me, Socrates, . . . You would have me believe that the audience is full of expectation that I shall speak well, and in that way, I shall be in turmoil.”\footnote{Ibid., 194a5 - 7.} Agathon senses that Socrates flattery is feigned, that in reality it is belittling the other speakers and thus attempting to unnerve Agathon’s performance. Agathon accuses Socrates of trying to scare him by making him nervous before his speech, of lying in order to make the man doubt his own abilities. Socrates responds that one such as Agathon, who has just recently performed before an audience of many men, would not be easy to scare. Socrates’ interruption forces Agathon not only to defend himself, but also give Socrates his due, for the poet replies that, “you really do not believe that I am so wrapped up in the theater as not to know that to a man of sense a few who are sensible are more terrifying than many fools.”\footnote{Ibid., 194c6 - 8.} Socrates has succeeded in adding two elements into the conversation indirectly, that is, without making them parts of a speech, and in so doing, adds another dimension to our discussion.
First, in forcing Agathon to admit the importance of wise spectators apart from otherwise unwise onlookers, Socrates quietly introduces the role wisdom plays in poetry. Agathon knows Socrates is wise and that his opinion is more important than those who are not wise. Yet why this is the case is not altogether clear, for was Socrates not part of the crowd in front of which Agathon performed so courageously; “But I suspect that we shall not prove to be of the wise, for we too were present there and were part of the many; but if you were to meet others who were indeed wise, then you might be ashamed before them – if you were perhaps to believe that you were doing something that is disgraceful.”54 Phaedrus interrupts this brief inquisition, but not before Socrates has established the second element in this discussion – a link between wisdom and shame. Put another way, Socrates suggests that the poet is weary of doing or saying things that are not true in front of those who know better. This is a curious exchange indeed, for it must tell us something important about tragedy, which Agathon so brilliantly represents, and shame. Socrates has forced Agathon to admit, albeit very indirectly, that his art says things that are not true or at least not wholly true but for which it usually feels no guilt, at least before the many. The tragedian may feel shame for what he has said when he is judged before the bar of wisdom, but he feels no such guilt when his art is practiced in its natural setting, i.e., in the community. There is a strange relationship between shame, poetry and politics that has emerged but is not

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54Ibid., 194c4 - 8.
yet developed. We must now examine Agathon’s speech in an effort to see how he adds to this rather disjointed discussion.

Agathon’s speech is unique to our examination because it is the first to ask the question: What is Eros? All of the others had assumed their starting point, taking for granted that their audience knew about what they were speaking: “I want to say how I must speak, and then to speak. For in my own opinion all the previous speakers did not eulogize the god but blessed human beings for the goods of which the god is the cause; yet no one has said what sort is he who makes these gifts.”55 Agathon’s is the first encomium to ask what is essentially a philosophical question, the typical “what is” question for which Socrates is so well known. He starts down an intellectual path, taking us away from a discussion of the heart toward one of the mind. The outcome of his endeavor is clear enough: “I declare that though all gods are happy, Eros (if sacred law allow it and it be without nemesis to say so) is the happiest of them, as he is the most beautiful and the best.”56 The eros we find is far different from the one we saw in Aristophanes, as well as the one we will see with Socrates. Agathon elevates eros, elevates it to such a degree that it becomes whole – wholly beautiful, wholly best, wholly perfect. He is no longer that longing which is so necessary to Aristophanes’ tale; now eros has become the reason for all beautiful and good things, including the harmony in the cosmos:

55Ibid., 194e4 - 195a1.
56Ibid., 195a5 - 7.
And the events of old about gods of which Hesiod and Parmenides speak belong to Necessity and not Eros, if what they say is true. Otherwise there would not have been castrations and bindings of each other, and many other acts of violence among the gods, had Eros been among them; but there would have been friendship and peace, just as there is now since Eros became king of the gods.57

Eros is the best of the gods because he is the youngest and most powerful. His is a rule of harmony, where the ugliness of necessity has been replaced with the soft and supple spring of eternal beauty.

Agathon adds to his encomium by suggesting that Eros’ eternal and unrivaled beauty is augmented by his unprecedented virtue; Eros is also the most just, moderate, courageous and wise of the gods.58 In this speech, Eros as a god attains an unparalleled status in the pantheon of the gods, and with this elevation comes an unprecedented scope to his power. Those under the spell of Eros become capable of all sorts of makings, all because Eros can rouse in man, beast, and god a type of inspiration that is akin to his overwhelming wisdom:

. . . the god is a poet of such wisdom that he can make poets of others too; at any rate, everyone whom Eros touches proves to be a poet, ‘though he be without the muse before.’ We can, accordingly, properly make use of this fact to infer that in every kind of musical making [i.e., poetry] Eros is a good poet [maker]; for what one does not have and does not know, one could neither give to another nor teach another and who will oppose the fact that the making of all animals is nothing but Eros’ wisdom, by which all the animals come to be and grow? And don’t we know that, in the case of the arts, whomever this god teaches turns out to be renowned and conspicuous in craftsmanship, and that he whom Eros does not touch remains obscure? Archery, for example, medicine, and divination were invented by Apollo when desire and love were his guides; and thus he too must be a pupil of Eros, as are the Muses in music, Hephaestus in black-smithing, Athena in weaving, and Zeus ‘the captain of gods and human beings.’59

57Ibid., 195c1 - 7.

58Ibid., 196b3 - 196e2.

59Ibid., 196e1 - 197b3.
Agathon elevates Eros so much that not only is he subordinated to nothing, but everything in the cosmos is subordinated to him. Eros becomes the cause of all making; he is the greatest of poets and craftsmen because he alone inspires that act which brings being out of nothing. Agathon has modified Aristophanes by taking from the comic that which is most distinctive about human nature and making it into a divine and cosmic principle along the lines of Eryximachus’ art.

This elevation naturally invites an element of suspicion because Agathon has taken eros that is subordinated to nothing and carried it to its logical extreme. The pinnacle of unfettered eros is a god who is wholly perfect and who is the cause of all good things in the cosmos, human as well as divine. Agathon’s tale makes us concentrate on the absolutely beautiful, that which is so perfect as to be without flaw or mistake; “so it is plain that, when Eros came to be among them, the affairs of the gods were arranged out of love of beauty – for there is no eros present in ugliness.” Concentrating on beauty has the effect of abstracting it from its setting, pulling it out of the context from which it emerges. This abstraction allows for a sort of perfection, for a version of the beautiful that encompasses all and, in turn, allows all to be encompassed within it.

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60 Socrates is not the only person present at this banquet who has suffered an attack by Aristophanes. The comedian’s *Thesmophoriazusae*, which came out a few years after the dramatic date of this dialogue and a few months after the *Lysistrata*, depicts Agathon as a mincing effeminate who dresses in feminine apparel the better to understand his female characters. The play tells of Agathon being urged by Euripides to disguise himself and spy on sacred feminine rituals – ceremonies resembling the Eleusinian mysteries, which several of the symposiasts were alleged to have profaned on that very night.” Ranasinghe, *The Soul of Socrates*, p. 134.

61 Symposium, 197b3 - 5.
It is fitting that the tragedian is the one who does this, for it is the tales of tragedy that make the sacrifices of heros beautiful, beautiful because men forget the bad that is done to their bodies because of the beautiful that is encountered by the soul.\footnote{Agathon is the first to discern in eros itself a tendency toward something higher than bodily love. Since eros is, on the highest level, love of fame, eros is in harmony with civilization.” Strauss, *On Plato’s Symposium*, p. 166.} Yet we must not be so enchanted by Agathon’s encomium to forget that which tragedy in a way forces us to ignore. In emphasizing beauty, Agathon’ speech does not offer the perfect corrective to the comic’s abstracting of the body. Just as Aristophanes focused on the body to the exclusion of the soul, so too does the tragedian focus on the beautiful to the exclusion of the body. Agathon’s speech cannot deal with that aspect of eros which is essentially bodily. His eros must be Eros, there can be no other being that embodies the perfectly beautiful other than an eternally young god. He must speak of gods and not lovers, for lovers are needy, and neediness is an aspect of the pre-Erotic cosmos. By attempting to balance the abstraction of the body with an abstraction of the soul, Agathon’s account is unable to do justice to the phenomenon of eros,
and hence cannot serve as the basis for the city.\textsuperscript{63} That which is perfect cannot be needy, and thus, Agathon’ Eros is not a lover, but a beloved.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In a way, Aristophanes and Agathon form a whole, although not a complete one. Both take what is distinctive to their types of poetry and emphasize it to the point of abstraction. This has the virtue of bringing out their charms most clearly, but has the vice of giving a partial picture that can also distort. Aristophanes shows us why we love our family, while Agathon shows us why we are willing to sacrifice ourselves for our city. The love of one’s own and the love of the beautiful come together in an uncomfortable embrace, each needing the other but nevertheless abstracting from that need. From this we can now see why it was that shame became an issue after Aristophanes’ speech but before Agathon’s. Aristophanes abstracts, and in a way is not ashamed of doing so. Comedy often requires the vulgar, that which says in public what cannot be said with propriety. It emphasizes the body by pointing emphatically toward

\textsuperscript{63}Martha Nussbaum gives a very nice context to this by emphasizing the role the particular plays in the beauty of tragedy; “But the force of tragedy is usually, too, to warn us of the dangers inherent in all searches for a single form: it continually displays to us the irreducible richness of human value, the complexity and indeterminacy of the lived practical situation. Our primary responsibility is always to the particular rather than the general; although in learning we will generalize to some extent, the test of the adequacy of these accounts will remain their fit with our experienced perception of the cases before us. In the \textit{Symposium}, Plato will indicate both his love and his reputation of this position by linking it with the character of Alcibiades.” Martha Nussbaum, \textit{The Fragility of Goodness} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 134. The beautiful tragedy is necessary for the city, maybe vitally so, but cannot be what it aspires to if it does not keep the needs of the city within its beautiful horizon. Agathon’s poetry fails during the celebration of its victory.
the body. Shame, that sense of impropriety or guilt that attends to things most private is not an element of comedy. But it is of tragedy, of that which ennobles the soul while often making us look away from the body.

Socrates was right to raise this point, for Agathon’s speech was in a way not true. Its emphasis on the beautiful to the exclusion of the body is an abstraction of eros that distorts; to emphasize something at the expense of something else is to flatter, and Agathon’s speech is most surely flattery. But this sort of flattery is necessary, especially to the city, for it has the effect of making men forget their bodies, a sacrifice often demanded of the citizens by the city. In a sense, the tragedian must flatter, he must say things in and through his art that are not wholly true, but which are nevertheless necessary. Tragedy ennobles by making man look up, and by extension, by making him ashamed to look down, to look to his petty self-interests. It makes man think of the whole before thinking of himself by opening up his soul to the beautiful while forgetting the body. Yet, even this nobility is not the whole of man, and in making Agathon feel shame for telling half-truths, Socrates gets the poet to acknowledge that his flattery ignores the importance of the body because it is an ugly importance. The poet is made to feel the same shame because his poetry ceased in its abstraction to be tragedy. Aristophanes and Agathon need one another, although Aristophanes is less needy. That does not distract from the crucial import, however: both comedy and tragedy represent a whole of which Socrates has no part, be that family or city. There is an irreconcilable tension between Socratic philosophizing and human
connectedness, a tension that begs to be defended now from the perspective of philosophy. With this tension in mind, we now turn to that which we have sought all along, to the speech of our other chief protagonist who will give an account of eros that forms the basis for the love of wisdom.
Chapter 5: The Love of the Good as One’s Own Forever:  
The Political Nature of Philosophy

I shall try in this way, men, to praise Socrates, through likenesses.  Now he perhaps will suppose it is for raising a laugh; but the likeness will be for the sake of the truth, not for the sake of the laughable.  I declare that he is most strictly like those silenuses that sit in the shop of herm sculptors, the ones that craftsmen make holding reed pipes or flutes; and if they are split in two and opened up, they show that they have images of gods within.  And I declare, in turn, that he bears a likeness to the satyr Marsyas.  Now, that you are like them at least in looks, Socrates, surely not even you would dispute; and as for your likeness to them in other respects, just listen to what I have to say.  You are hybristic, are you not?

Symposium, 215a4 - 215b7

Socrates’ Speech: The Love of the Good

Socrates’ account of eros was the reason for which we began this part of our investigation, yet its emergence is a long time in the making.  The Symposium required us to witness a great deal before we were allowed to encounter his speech, and now that we are upon it, we are in a better position to evaluate its content.  Socrates draws our attention to what separates his speech from the preceding ones:

For in my stupidity I believed the truth had to be told about anything that was given a eulogy, and that this was the underpinning, and that by selecting the most beautiful parts of the truth one was to arrange them in the seemliest manner possible.  And I was quite filled with the proud thought that I should speak well, since I knew the truth about praising anything.  But it was not this after all, it seems, that was meant by the fair praising of anything, but the attribution to the matter at hand of the greatest and fairest things possible regardless of whether this was so or not.1

The others had done what Agathon did – say things that were beautiful but not wholly true.  Socrates will tell the truth so that the most beautiful aspects come forth, but never so that beauty takes precedence over the truth.  Socrates will not flatter, and his reluctance or inability to do so

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1Plato, Symposium, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 198d3 - 198e2
sets him off from the others in such a way that we wonder if this is not distinctive about his personality. If we use Agathon as our reference, flattery was related to beauty, which makes man see himself as part of something greater while forgetting about his body. Beauty makes bodily self-sacrifice possible because it abstracts from the body. But such an abstraction assumes the body; self-sacrifice by definition requires a body to sacrifice in order for such a sacrifice to be noble in turn. Socrates does not flatter because he does not assume the body in a way that Agathon does; Socrates does not form a whole with Aristophanes in the same way as the tragic poet. Socrates’ eros is peculiar in that it does not involve the love of one’s own; “But after all I did not know that his was to be the manner of praise, and in ignorance I came to an agreement with you that I would take my turn in praising. ‘So the tongue promised but the mind did not.’; let me then call it quits. I am not a eulogist in this fashion: I am simply incapable of it.” What his eros does entail, though, has yet to be seen.

Before we look to Socrates’ speech, a few points must first be made. There are several characteristics of Socrates’ personality on display throughout the dialogue, characteristics that must be taken into account and reconciled to the best of our abilities. First, as was clear from the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates is hubristic. This hubris is evident in Socrates’ initial dialogue with Agathon, where he essentially insulted the poet for his ignorance and lack of humility.  

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2Ibid., 199a3 - 7.

3Ibid., 175d3 - 175e9.
Socrates has no problem telling people rather openly that their opinions are wrong.⁴ As Allan Bloom points out, “He says that Agathon’s praise of Eros is exactly what will appeal to those who do not know Eros, as opposed to those who know him. This means everyone else there except Socrates. Nothing could better illustrate Socrates’ hubris.”⁵ Socrates is no flatterer; he does not hesitate to point out what is not true. He shows himself to be hubristic because he prioritizes the truth over everything else, a theme we will see often repeated in the *Symposium*.

Socrates has another distinctive characteristic that illustrates in more depth his idiosyncratic hubris. To go along with this hubris, Socrates is also shameless, i.e., he will think and say things that are usually inappropriate in polite company. That he is hubristic in the current setting is evidence of his shamelessness, but there are many other examples of this trait, not the least of which is found in the prologue to his speech. In his cross-examination of Agathon Socrates says, “So come now, since you have explained fairly and magnificently all the rest about what sort he is, then tell me this as well about Eros: is Eros the sort that is love of something or of nothing? I am not asking whether he is of a mother or of a father (for the question whether Eros is love of mother or father would be laughable), . . .”⁶ If one imagines this speech played out on stage, one realizes just how laughable Socrates’ suggestion truly is. These

⁴Rather openly must be understood properly, because Socrates always does it ironically.


⁶*Symposium*, 199c5 - 199d3.
men have been discussing eros, which, as Aristophanes has taught us, can never be separated from the body. That Socrates would have used as his preliminary example of eros the love of one’s mother or father is not only comic, it is almost obscene. Who would think to say one’s mother or father when asked about the object of eros? This rather odd joke on Socrates’ part reminds us that eros both is and is not comfortable within the family, and that the problems of incest are erotic problems. It also points out that Socrates’ quest for the truth of things, in this case the truth of eros, allows if not requires him to explore every avenue, including ones that would normally be off limits:

Agathon, like all the others, to a greater or lesser degree, is conventional and keeps Eros within the bounds of the conventional. Socrates will think more shamelessly. He will speak about gods and about Eros, and the Oedipus story reminds us the Eros between parents and children is naturally possible and forbidden by the gods. This willingness to entertain forbidden thoughts is a large part of what links Eros to philosophy.

Socrates’ shamelessness and hubris are two sides of the same coin, and even in this open and frank setting he pushes the boundaries beyond the limits of what might be called “good taste.”

**Socrates’ Speech: Part One**

As we move now to his speech, we see that it can be separated into four interrelated segments. The first begins with his cross-examination of Agathon, which he needs, “. . . in order

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7One becomes a mother or father as a result of eros, not as its object.

8Cf. Republic, 461b9 - 461e2.

that when I have got him to agree with me I can go ahead and speak.”\textsuperscript{10} This mini dialogue within a dialogue serves as a prologue that will unite what came before with what Socrates will say later. Socrates gets Agathon to agree that eros is the love of something, a something that the lover does not possess but desperately wants; “is it not a necessity rather than a likelihood that the desirous thing desires what it is in need of, and does not desire unless it is in need.”\textsuperscript{11} The lover also wants to ensure that his possession of what he desires is continuous, or put another way, that what he loves is his also in the future, since its possession cannot be guaranteed forever; “To want that those things be safe and present for him in future times, is to love that which is not yet at hand for him and which he does not have.”\textsuperscript{12} In these opening lines, Socrates gets Agathon to acknowledge the crucial element of eros that Aristophanes asserted: eros is neediness. Eros by its very nature is incomplete, and its longing is for that which it is without. Socrates agrees with the comic poet about this aspect of eros, an agreement that brings together the two poles of those who do not subordinate eros. Yet there is a profound difference between the two, and it is for that reason Socrates’ cross-examination moves next to the beautiful.

Eros is incompleteness, but its object is not the body’s mythical other half. Instead, Socrates takes the undifferentiated eros from Aristophanes’ speech and supplies its object

\textsuperscript{10}Symposium, 199b9 - 11.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 200a8 - 200b1.

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 200d8 - 10.
through Agathon’s. Socrates gets Agathon to agree that, “and if this is so, Eros would be nothing else than love of beauty, but not of ugliness?”13 Socrates begins his own speech about eros by uniting the comic and the tragedian together, harmonizing those aspects most important as well as most congruent. Of course his doing so leaves out much that was not compatible, most importantly the love of one’s own. But this was not unexpected. Socrates told us in the beginning that he was only capable of telling the truth and of arranging those parts of the truth together in such a way as to show their inherent beauty. He is compelled to unify what has come before by taking what fits with his understanding of eros and discarding the rest. He in fact does that, but whether or not his unification of the comic and the tragic poets is sufficient remains to be seen.

Before moving into the second part of his speech, Socrates indirectly adds another aspect to the discussion, one that is seemingly innocuous but in fact plays a very important role. After getting Agathon to agree that eros is the love of the beautiful, he goes on to ask the poet, “But, still, tell me about a small point. Are the good things beautiful as well in your opinion.”14 Agathon replies yes, to which Socrates adds, “So if Eros is in need of beautiful things, and the good things are fair, he would be in need of the good things as well.”15 This is an important point

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13Ibid., 201a8 - 10.
14Ibid., 201c1 - 3.
15Ibid., 201c5- 6.
that must not be overlooked. Socrates has asserted that the good and the beautiful are one and
the same, an assertion the tragic poet might either agree with in principle or whose nuance is
simply lost on him. Yet it is not necessarily true that the good and the beautiful are the same.

Tragedy is that form of poetry which uses the noble and beautiful to enrich man’s life, to get him
to think beyond himself and consider those actions or avenues for which he attains glory, but
because of which he must sacrifice. It gets men to think beyond their own, to look up instead of
down or across, and in so doing, makes political life both possible and beautiful. But goodness is
not a criterion of this art, nor could it be. It is hard to see how the noble is good for the one who
will sacrifice himself, especially from the point of view of his body. Tragedy succeeds because it
makes man forget about his body, so to speak, not because it makes him consider what is good, a
consideration that necessarily involves one’s body. Moreover, Socrates’ insistence that men
want the good and the beautiful not only to be their own, but to be their own forever – a
impossibility from the standpoint of the body – suggests that his linking of the good and the
beautiful is at once both tenuous and impossible. Thus, this seemingly trivial point is in fact a
very important one; Socrates has added a new element – the good – into a discussion that before
only dealt with it indirectly. This new aspect of the discussion is uniquely Socratic, and it shows
how Socrates both can and cannot add to what the previous poets have ventured.
Socrates’ Speech: Part Two

The second part of Socrates’ speech is unique, for in it one finds both the core of Socrates’ understanding of eros and what might be called the “genesis” of that understanding. Socrates will recount a series of conversations he had with a Mantenian priestess named Diotima from whom he learned erotics. This tale is unique in that it breaks with two established conventions that have dominated the setting of the Symposium: the preference for speeches over dialogues, and the exclusion of females from the discussion of eros. Socrates admitted that he was incapable of lying about eros for the sake of a eulogy, and here he shows that he is unwilling or unable to give an encomium of eros on his own. Instead, he will give us another dialogue, one where he is not the superior to be sure, but one that nevertheless is much more analytical and much less poetic than what has gone before. And that he learns about eros through a dialogue with a women is indeed strange, although not altogether inappropriate. There is something productive about this women that Socrates does not possess but which is essential to our discussion of eros.

After his linking of the good with the beautiful, Socrates recalls the first of four topics of conversation between himself and Diotima: the nature of Eros. Socrates admits that he was once like Agathon, believing, “that Eros was a great god, and was the love of beautiful things. She then went on to refute me with those same arguments with which I refuted him – that he is neither
beautiful, according to you argument, nor good.”16 In his youth Socrates held an idealized opinion of Eros – that he was the best and most beautiful of the gods. Diotima disabused him of these childish thoughts, teaching him instead that Eros is lower than the beautiful and the good, in-between what is both beautiful and ugly, wise and ignorant. Eros is like correct opinion, being not quite knowledge but certainly not ignorance.17 Nor is he even a god, being needy and ugly and in-between immortality and mortality. No, Eros is a daemon, a being that exists between this world and the divine world, tasked with:

Interpreting and ferrying to gods things from human beings and to human beings things from gods: the requests and sacrifices of human beings, the orders and exchanges-for-sacrifices; for it is in the middle of both and fills up the interval so that the whole itself had been bound together by it. Through this proceeds all divination and the art of the priests who deal with sacrifices, initiatory rituals, incantations, and every kind of soothsaying and magic.18

Socrates’ first lesson is thus one of disenchantment; it is necessary to know the truth of things even if that truth is not altogether beautiful.

Having established his traits, the second topic Diotima broaches with Socrates is the history of Eros’ birth. Eros is the son of Poros and Penia, Resource and Poverty, having been conceived when his mother schemed to have a child by his father who had become drunk at a feast to celebrate Aphrodite’s birth and had fallen asleep in the garden of Zeus. Eros is a lover of the beautiful because his conception was on the same day as Aphrodite’s birth, a coincidence

16Ibid., 201e4 - 7.
17Ibid., 201e8 - 202a11.
18Ibid., 202e4 - 10.
linking them together eternally. Being the offspring of two rather inconsonant parents, Eros inherited curious characteristics, being like his mother in that, “he is always poor; and he is far from being tender and beautiful, as the many believe, but is tough, squalid, shoeless, and homeless, always lying on the ground without a blanket or a bed, sleeping in doorways and along waysides in the open air; he has the nature of his mother, always dwelling with neediness.”

From his father Eros, “. . . plots to trap the beautiful and the good, and is courageous, stout and keen, a skilled hunter, always weaving devices, desirous of practical wisdom and inventive, philosophizing through all his life, a skilled magician, druggist, sophist.” And because he is in-between man and god, wisdom and ignorance, Diotima also links Eros to philosophy by saying that:

Eros is never either without resources nor wealthy, but is in between wisdom and lack of understanding. For here is the way it is: No one of the gods philosophizes and desires to become wise – for he is so – nor if there is anyone else who is wise, does he philosophize. Nor, in turn, do those who lack understanding philosophize and desire to become wise; for it is precisely this that makes the lack of understanding so difficult – that a man is not beautiful and good, nor intelligent, he has the opinion that that is sufficient for him. Consequently, he who does not believe that he is in need does not desire that which he does not believe he needs.

This rather strange genealogy establishes the divine links between Eros and beauty in such a way as to make philosophy, beauty, and wisdom all related, and hence, to establish philosophy as an essentially erotic phenomenon.

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19 Ibid., 203c5 - 203d4.

20 Ibid., 203d5 - 8.

21 Ibid., 203e5 - 204a8.
We would be remiss, however, if we did not say a bit more about Socrates’ first lessons from Diotima. We notice that things have gone together which do not seem to fit but which are nevertheless important. The nature of Eros is essentially a metaxy, a state characterized by becoming because of its lack or neediness. It is in-between wisdom and ignorance, beauty and ugliness, and immortality and mortality. But while opinion is surely between wisdom and ignorance, what lies between beauty and ugliness, much less immortality and mortality? True, some nondescript state may be found between even beauty and ugliness, but between immortality and mortality? Is such a state possible, especially as a description of eros?

Moreover, we have seen that each speaker gave a voice to his own preferences, championing his particular tastes and opinions. Socrates too does this, and we witness it when Diotima establishes the link between eros and philosophy. The genealogy she provides is rather strange, however, causing us to question its seriousness. To state this skepticism succinctly: what does Eros get from his father that is not already implied in the nature of his mother? Every characteristic of the father that Eros inherits is either given directly by his mother, or is implicit

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23 “There can also be something between mortal and immortal. Is this possible, we have to ask. We can easily see that something is neither beautiful or ugly, but is it true in all cases that there must be something in between? What about numbers? Neither odd nor even. Can you say of a number it is between odd and even? It wouldn’t work. It seems that the case of mortal and immortal is like the case of odd and even rather than of beautiful and ugly.” Leo Strauss, *On Plato’s Symposium* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.189.
in the very action that brings Eros into being. Penia traps Poros courageously, stoutly and keenly, hunting him through the use of devices and practical wisdom. Her wiles are indeed impressive, if only because she succeeds through guile, trickery and deceit in getting exactly what she wanted. As Poverty, Penia is the opposite of Poros, Resource, yet she shows herself to be the more resourceful one of the pair. She is more resourceful than the god of resourcefulness, yet she is his opposite, or a-poros. This cannot be a mere coincidence:

> It is to be noted that word *poros*, with the privative prefix “a,” means not only the same thing as *penia* but also the difficulty or perplexity that is provided by a contradiction in an argument. An *aporia* arises at the point in an argument when the interlocutor contradicts himself and must look for a solution but does not know quite how to do so. He is literally without resource.²⁴

By using this genealogy, has Diotima not given voice to Socrates’ own preferences and opinions about eros, albeit in an indirect if not outrageous way?

To push this question a bit further, does Diotima’s description of Eros, given all that he inherits from his parents, not remind us of someone with whom we are familiar? Socrates has recounted a conversation in which we are told that Eros bears the likeness of none other than Socrates himself! We understand at once why Socrates asserted he could not offer an encomium of eros as the others had; even they did not go to the lengths of saying they themselves were one in the same as the daemon.²⁵ Socrates’ tale gives irrevocable evidence of his hubris and shamelessness, a point that cannot be emphasized enough:


²⁵Cf. chapter 2, note 41.
So Eros, the powerful attraction to the beautiful, is the same as Socrates, the man most powerfully attracted to wisdom. This is the identity Diotima wants to establish and explain. In an act of supreme hubris, Socrates uses Diotima to praise himself in the guise of Eros. The only bit of modesty he displays consists in his denying he is a god. But, for reasons that may soon become evident, he probably does not wish to be.26

We were warned that getting to the truth of the matter would require defaming certain beautiful things, but who could predict this level of hubris? The first two parts of Socrates’ speech thus end with the amazing assertion that Socrates is Eros incarnate, and that he is irresistibly drawn to the beautiful and the good.27 Yet two questions remain. First, how is it that the erotic Socrates is able to reconcile the good and the beautiful in a manner that is convincing, especially when the beautiful involves the sacrifice of the body? Secondly, Socrates told us we love for the good and beautiful to be ours forever. But given that our bodies are not immortal, how can Socrates claim that eros points beyond the immanent, toward a more transcendent sphere of which it can never, at least bodily, partake? Is this an abstraction from eros like the one seen in Agathon’s speech, or does it point us into a new direction, toward another avenue that must be explored in connection with eros?

26Bloom, “The Ladder of Love,” p. 133. Friedlander too notes this when he says, “In this Eros, the lover of the beautiful, we now perceive more and more traits that make him at the same time a lover of wisdom, i.e., a philosopher, and closely connected, we perceive also traits of Socrates (much as in Agathon’s Eros there were traits of Agathon).” Paul Friedlander, Plato, Vol. 3, trans. Hans Meyerhoff (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 25.

27The question that arises from this assertion is whether Diotima is teaching Socrates to be erotic, or whether Socrates is using Diotima to teach others his erotic lessons.
Socrates’ Speech: Part Three

To this point we have seen Socrates link the beautiful and good together as the proper objects of eros, and then identify himself as the paradigmatic symbol of eros. Socrates is eros, the embodiment of love whose longing is for that which is both beautiful and good. Yet, in a way that reminds us of the dialogue hovering in the background of our examination, Socrates begins the third phase of his tale by asking a rather odd question, “All right, stranger, what you say is fine. If Eros is of this sort, of what use is he for human beings?”28 This question is itself comical, for who would ask such a question other than one who has never himself experienced the passions of eros? Aristophanes forced us to ask what use Socrates was to the city, and here we have Socrates asking what use he, as eros, is for human beings. This is a very fine question indeed, for it must surely be asked by a philosopher of himself in the very practice of his philosophy. In this way the Socrates of the Symposium is very much like the Socrates of the Apology; he has learned that his practice of philosophizing must first become the most important subject of inquiry. But for a lover, nay, the lover, to ask what good love is cannot help but strike the reader as curious if not ridiculous. That Socrates’ eros is different has been suggested by our examination from the beginning, but now we see that his eros, through the very activity that defines its neediness, becomes almost unintelligible to common opinion. Socrates is something of

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28 Symposium, 204c7 - 8.
a philistine, a lover who can only be called such by extension. His is an eros that questions its very erotic character; it is love completely stripped of beauty.29

If we remain true to the tale and think about Socrates as a parallel symbol of eros during the third part of Diotima’s lesson, a truly fascinating picture emerges. Diotima asks Socrates, “what will he have who gets the beautiful things?”30 If eros is love of the beautiful, Diotima’s question is an important one: what will he, in loving the beautiful, possess if he attains the beautiful? Socrates the philistine lover is dumbfounded, confessing that “I said I was hardly capable of giving a ready answer to this question.”31 It is only when Diotima changes the question that Socrates can answer more readily. Instead of the beautiful Diotima asks about the good, saying, “What if someone changed his query and used the good instead of the beautiful? Come, Socrates, the lover of the good things loves: what does he love?”32 This Socrates can answer, replying immediately that those in possession of the good things possess happiness. This short but telling exchange is important, for in it we learn that Socrates as eros does not yearn for one’s own or the beautiful. No, Socrates is a lover of the good, those things that contribute to

29If Socrates learned anything from Aristophanes’ Clouds it was that his way of life had to be justified against the greatest alternatives available. Thus, the first step would involve asking both what eros is, as well as for what it yearns.

30Symposium, 204d5 - 6.

31Ibid., 204d7 - 8.

32Ibid., 204e1 - 3.
man’s happiness, and it is only once Diotima links the good to the beautiful, much as Socrates had done earlier, that Socrates is in a position to answer her question.\textsuperscript{33}

There are obvious problems with this, both from what we have seen previously, as well as what we now see through Diotima’s cross-examination of Socrates. Socrates is no lover of the beautiful; instead, he is a lover of the good and a desirer of happiness. In itself the desire for the good and for happiness is not odd, but Socrates’ inability to articulate a response to Diotima’s question concerning the beautiful does strike us as a bit strange. It is all the more strange when we consider too that the beautiful is, at a very basic level, much more closely linked with eros than the good. We love our own, and we love the beautiful; we may even love for the beautiful to become our own or that our own become beautiful. But who loves the good in an immediate sense? As it is used here, the good is the product of reflection where one must consider what is good before being able to love it. Surely this is possible, and in a strange way it resonates with what we have learned of Socrates. It is not, however, common, if by common we mean that experience of eros which is felt by most men most of the time. If Socrates were correct on this account, men would pick their mates based on a calculation of benefit designed to bring about the greatest degree of happiness. But even if eros does desire to be happy, who in love thinks of love as a type of calculation? Socrates as eros tells us a great deal about Socrates’ eros, especially

\textsuperscript{33}These intricacies of Diotima’s speech may be in fact the most solid evidence we possess of the intimacy between Plato’s presentation of Socrates and Xenophon’s, which is traditionally held to be more ‘vulgar.’ Cf. Christopher Bruell, “Xenophon and his Socrates,” Interpretation, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Winter, 1988), especially pp. 297-298.
in terms of what its objects are and how it relates to other erotic experiences. Yet, if we are to draw a lesson from this, are we to conclude that there is no room for beauty in eros?

If we came to such a conclusion, we would be forced to say that, of all human beings, Socrates alone is a lover. To say this would be a considerable claim, and Diotima is aware that what is possibly the truest form of love must not disqualify the other forms of eros. While Socrates alone persists in his pure love of the good, he is not the only man who desires to be happy. All men by nature desire happiness, and hence all men are in a way lovers. Thus she asks of Socrates, “Why is it, then, Socrates, . . . that we deny that everyone loves – given, that is, that everyone loves the same things and always – but we say that some love and some do not?”

Diotima and Socrates might be the only ones who truly know for what eros longs, but all men in their own ways love. What unites all erotes as erotic is fertility, or put another way, all eros has as a necessary consequence of its yearning productivity – the ability to bring forth. It is for this reason that Diotima introduces an analogy to make clear the relationship between different types of love with reference to different types of making. The term lover is really a genus, yet it is most often used to refer to a species. Similarly, a poet is a maker, or one who is productive, a category that also includes other forms of craftsmanship and artistry. Even though the poet is a species of the genus maker, he is identified with the genus itself because of poetry’s power and beauty.

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34*Symposium*, 205a10 - 205b2.

When men speak of making, they think first of the greatest examples, which are the most beautiful. The poet is the one who brings into being the most beautiful productions through meter and melody. So too with eros, as one species of eros alone is most typically associated with the genus. Interestingly enough, however, Diotima does not tell Socrates which species this is. She reiterates that eros is truly, “... the whole desire of good things and of being happy, ‘the greatest and all-beguiling eros,’” but fails to explain what species is mistakenly taken for the genus of erotic things.36

Instead, Diotima tells Socrates of those erotic species not confused with the whole of eros. Diotima is under no illusions that men think of love in the same way she does. She tells Socrates that many forms of lovers are not thought of as true lovers; “But those who turn toward it in many other ways, in terms of either money-making, love of gymnastics, or philosophy, are neither said to love nor called lovers; whereas those who earnestly apply themselves to a certain single kind, get the name of the whole, love, and are said to love and called lovers.”37 Philosophy no more than gymnastics is thought of as true love. When the many think of lovers, they do not think of businessmen or philosophers, even though they in their own way too love. Instead they associate the whole genus of love with one powerful species, and it is no coincidence that Diotima used an analogy with poetry to make this important point.

36Ibid., 205d1 - 2.
37Ibid., 205d2 - 7.
What exactly is this form of love generally associated with the entire species? Diotima tells Socrates that, “... there is a certain account ... according to which those who seek their own halves are lovers. But my speech denies that eros is of a half or of a whole – unless, comrade, that half or whole can be presumed to be really good.”38 Here Socrates and Diotima take direct aim at our comic poet who had so profoundly announced that eros’ longing was for our ancient wholeness, and hence, our other half. Albeit indirectly, our philosophical interlocutors acknowledge that most men most of the time experience eros the way Aristophanes had explained it, and hence, the love of one’s own is rather naturally elevated to the status of the genus. This acknowledgment is indeed important, for it suggests that Aristophanes was right in a sense – most men do not love the good in the way Diotima and Socrates do. The eros most experience – the love of one’s own – is thought to be eros simply, if only because its experience is that of unity, of the embrace with another that reminds us of our wholeness. Its attendant fertility is also what brings forth human children, and hence the continuation of the human species. The love of one’s own is confused with the highest because it is most common and necessary, not because it is superior. And because the common expression of eros assumes the beautiful as a means to its own end, the relationship between human coupling and poetry is hardly a coincidence.

38Ibid., 205d9 - 12. Leo Strauss makes an important point when he says of this passage that, “I don’t know whether there is another instance in classical Greek literature where a woman calls a man comrade. I regard it as possible that Socrates here, as it were, drops the mask and speaks to Aristophanes.” Leo Strauss, On Plato’s Symposium, p. 204.
Nevertheless, most men do not love correctly, or at least do not understand the true
nature of their longing if they understand eros simply as the love of their own. Diotima explains:

... for human beings are willing to have their own feet and hands cut off, if their opinion is that
their own are no good. For I suspect that each does not cleave to his own (unless one calls the
good one’s own and belonging to oneself, and the bad alien to oneself) since there is nothing that
human beings love other than the good.39

Man is mistaken if he believes his erotic yearning can be fulfilled in bodily embrace; the body
itself is a dispensable part of eros. While it may be true that productivity is a necessary
consequence of eros, that does not mean that human children are the best expression of erotic
fertility, especially if they are not good. This quick but important confrontation with
Aristophanes brings out the full teaching of eros that Diotima gives to Socrates; “so, in sum . . .
eros is of the good’s being one’s own always.”40

Before moving on, let us pause for a moment to review what we have seen. Aristophanes
taught us that eros is a longing for wholeness brought about through our separation from our
other half. Agathon counters Aristophanes’ tale by suggesting that eros longs for the beautiful in
its most perfected and exalted form. Diotima and Socrates have dismissed Aristophanes’ tale and
appropriated parts of Agathon’s speech, however tenuously, with the result that philosophy has
now emerged as the most sincere and correct form of eros possible. In fact, one could even say
that Diotima entirely reverses Aristophanes’s speech, suggesting that eros is the love of the good,

39*Symposium*, 205e3 - 7.

40Ibid., 206a12.
because it is good, to be one’s own forever, instead of eros being the love of one’s own, which is
good because it is own’s own, forever:

From her (Diotima) point of view, then, Aristophanes’ rebellion against civilized values in the
name of primordial unity is an outgrowth of his passionate adherence to these very values. His
noble attachment to an ideal union or community has blinded him to what she regards as his
actual self and its true needs; he has succumbed to the spell of tragedy. Thus, in her eyes, the
comic poet does what he most wants to avoid; he makes himself ridiculous.41

The Symposium has set up exactly what we were in search of – a dialogue of competing speeches
between our comic poet and our philosopher. But the dialogue is not complete – in her
willingness to put parts of Agathon’s speech to use, Diotima has woven a rather tenuous
relationship between the good and the beautiful. We turn to her final words then to see how her
resolution sheds light on Socrates’ relationship to both comedy and tragedy.

**Socrates’ Speech: Part Four**

If eros is truly the love of the good to be one’s own forever, what would the activities of a
truly erotic man be?42 This is the question Diotima poses to Socrates, and it is one that can only
be understood in the manner in which we have framed our discussion thus far. On the surface, it
makes no sense to ask what the erotic activities are. Such a question is almost ridiculous, a trait
we see with increasing frequency in this conversation. Who needs to ask what activities
constitute loving? But this is an important question, indeed the important question, especially

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41 Harry Neumann, “On the Comedy of Plato’s Aristophanes,” *The American Journal of

42 *Symposium*, 206b1 - 4.
for someone who would suggest that the good is eros’ true object. Aristophanes could only scoff
at such a question, for even asking it of him, to say nothing of its answer, would be obscene. Yet
Diotima and Socrates must answer it, for it is not clear what the activities are, much less the
consequences of those activities, for one who loves the good.

The answer seems straightforward enough; “their deed is bringing to birth in beauty both
in terms of the body and of the soul.”\textsuperscript{43} People in love create, they bring forth something out of
nothing much like the craftsmen, artists, and poets. This equation of eros and fertility points
again toward the role beauty plays in love, a seemingly normal connection to all but the
philosophers of love. Diotima again attaches the beautiful to eros only after defining eros
without any reference to beauty, a strange addition not lost on Socrates; “‘whatever it is that you
mean,’ I said, ‘is in need of divination, and I do not begin to understand.”\textsuperscript{44} As was the case
when she first asked Socrates what use beauty was to man, Diotima’s attempt to link the
beautiful and the good confuses Socrates. Something so natural, such as childbirth for example, is
alien to Socrates, who cannot understand why it is that bringing forth is an erotic activity.
Admittedly giving birth is connected to erotic activity only as a consequence of that activity,
which itself is regarded as self-sufficient. Aristophanes suggested as much in his encomium.
That Socrates reasons in earnest about such things, however, suggests that his eros is wholly

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 206b7 - 8.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 206b9 - 10.
indifferent to what appears natural to most men. Socrates cannot comprehend what most take for
granted; even if fertility is taken out of the picture, men still consider erotic activity to be
essentially bodily.\(^ {45}\) We see how alien our philosophical interlocutors’ definition of eros is when
measured against that of most men. It is true that Diotima will try to give a philosophical
argument that explains giving birth, but definitions alone will not replace what most men possess
without argument. On the surface, and it is on the surface that one’s opinions may flow freely
without the aid or hindrance of reason, this love of the good is most surely strange.

In addition to demonstrating in practice Socrates’ curious eros, as well as reintroducing
the strained relationship between the good and the beautiful, Diotima’s question about erotic
activity also refocuses us on the final loose end of this tale – that of eternity. We have seen her
suggest that eros demands the possession of the good things forever, a claim made tenuous both
by the bodily nature of eros and the mortality of the body. This seems to be necessary,
however, for by again linking the beautiful with the good, Diotima is able to link the beautiful
with immortality through her definition of eros. This is as it should be, since it is easier in many
respects to talk about giving birth in connection with beauty than with the good. As Diotima
explains:

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\text{All human beings, Socrates, . . . conceive both in terms of the body and in terms of the soul, and}
\text{whenever they are at a certain age, their nature desires to give birth; but it is incapable of giving}
\]

\(^ {45}\text{Fertility, however, cannot be taken out of the picture by nature. Modern}
\text{interpretations will find this aspect of the speech increasingly mystifying if only because of the}
\text{degree to which art is so commonly used to controvert eros’ bodily nature today.}\]
In the very experience of eros men long for eternity; they long that what they feel and experience here and now might last forever. Their experiences with beauty help to bring this longing to fruition in the only sense that is possible – through the creation of offspring. Beauty is linked to offspring because the beautiful is man’s encounter with eternity; in a way, beauty is eternity, that which is perfect and forever. Man longs for this eternity, that his sublime experiences too last forever, and through this longing he brings forth his own little piece of eternity – the only one open to him as man. Eros is necessarily linked to bringing forth, for, as Diotima explains, “. . . engendering is born forever and is immortal as far as that can happen to a mortal being. From what has been agreed to, it is necessary to desire immortality with good, provided eros is of the good’s always being one’s own. So it is necessary from this argument that eros be of immortality too.” It was important for her to reintroduce beauty into the discussion, then, for through it is our only access to having the good as one’s own forever.

Because every species of eros has in common fertility, there must be more than one way of bringing forth. According to Diotima, there are two ways in which men can be productive; they are either “. . . pregnant in terms of their bodies, . . . and they turn rather to women and are

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46Ibid., 206c1 - 7.

47Ibid., 206e7 - 207a3.
erotic in this way, furnishing for themselves through the procreation of children immortality, remembrance, and happiness (as they believe) for all future time.”⁴⁸ Or they are “. . . pregnant in terms of the soul – for these, in fact, . . . are those who in their souls even more than in their bodies conceive those things that it is appropriate for soul to conceive and bear.”⁴⁹ Both bring about copies that out last oneself, the first a bodily copy, the second a copy of one’s soul. The first is more common, while the second is more noble. It is not surprising that trying to bring forth images of one’s soul in others is more noble, for it is unique to man alone, and is what is meant by education.⁵⁰ It is also not surprising that this educative molding of souls is what is practiced by those arts most associated with poets, especially the greatest poets; “and everyone would choose to have for himself children like these rather than the human kind; and if one looks at Homer, Hesiod, and the other good poets, one envies them: what offspring of themselves they have left behind!”⁵¹ In order to link eros to eternity, Diotima had to introduce again the beautiful, and in doing so, has shown us why poetry is most often confused with the whole genus of making.

⁴⁸Ibid., 208e1 - 5. This is the means to eternity shared by most men most of the time, but it is also the means man shares with all other beasts. Cf. 207a6 - 207c2. Man’s desire for eternity is inchoate, a ruse of nature meant to perpetuate the species without forethought.

⁴⁹Ibid., 208e5 - 209a3.

⁵⁰Ibid., 209b7 - 209c6.

⁵¹Ibid., 209c10 - 209d3.
The poets, especially the greatest poets, are those whose eros drives them toward immortality in such a way as to create the most noble and most numerous copies of themselves. They are the great educators because the product of their erotic activity teaches men and women alike the virtues of their souls, molding them by bringing forth in their offspring that likeness which they long to express. It may be true that there are other types of makers, just as there are other types of lovers, but none are as important or as passionate. The great poets are the most passionate of men because their longing for eternity is without peer, as is their influence. But we remember that this longing for the beautiful is not shared by our Socrates, who we can almost hear in the background saying: “Of what use is this desire for immortality,” or “What good does producing one offspring, much less many, provide for me.” Our philistine Socrates would not be able to comprehend wanting to have human children, for what good are one’s own bodily children to a man who seeks only abstract fulfillment.

Nor could he understand wanting to have children of the soul, for those too are born of the noble and not the good. We have seen that eros is that human phenomenon where the body

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52In distinction to most men whose productiveness is the consequence of their eros, the great poet’s beautiful creations are themselves erotic because the activity of producing and the production merge into one.

53Such a view is still plausible today, for who would doubt the influence of the Romantic poets, to say nothing of Shakespeare, on our conception of the beautiful, and hence, of our erotic tastes.

54This suggests Socrates’ own historical children were the product of a motivation other than love.
and soul intersect, and it is here in Diotima’s tale of procreation that we see this intersection at play. Although having human children is the result of eros’ bodily nature, it is not an activity without higher aspirations, which is why, no matter how brutish, it still requires beauty to be achieved. The act of love-making itself is beautiful, or at least is made possible by the beautiful. And the product of that activity is also beautiful in so far as it allows man to participate in eternity. Those who seek to reproduce in the soul do so with an eye, no matter how inchoate, to the body, as Diotima suggests by linking reproduction in the soul to the arrangement of cities and households, as well as to the laws.55 The whole of eros is the domain of the poets, for poetry alone can express the interconnectedness of one’s own mortality to the immortally beautiful.

Yet Socrates has no feeling for this; he has denied the Aristophanic love of one’s own and shown an inability to appreciate the necessity of beauty in human life. Socrates’ erotic activity is philosophy, not love-making, and his desire for completion is entirely self-centered. For the common man and poet alike, the neediness of eros gives way to the overflowing of pregnancy, to a state no longer characterized as such by need. But for Socrates eros is never sated, leading to an unquenchable but barren yearning to know.56 It is for this reason that Diotima adds one final link to the erotic puzzle, telling Socrates that “you too might be initiated into these erotics; but as for the perfect revelations – for which the others are means, if one were to proceed correctly on the

55 Symposium, 209a7 & 209d7.

way – I do not know if you would be able to be initiated into them. Now I shall speak,’ she said.

‘I shall not falter in my zeal; do try to follow, if you are able.’\textsuperscript{57} Diotima has shown an ability to articulate the whole within which most men find their erotic homes. But Socrates does not find his home there, and for him, she must open up a new path, one that leads to the fulfilment of his peculiar form of eros.\textsuperscript{58} This other path toward fulfilment is one that can be traversed only by the most dedicated of disciples. It requires love to be sure, but also reflection, seeing through examinations of bodies true beauty, beauty that is itself immortal and everlasting:

For this is what it is to proceed correctly, or to be led by another, to erotics – beginning from these beautiful things here, always to proceed on up for the sake of that beauty, using these beautiful things here as steps: from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; and from beautiful bodies to beautiful pursuits; and from pursuits to beautiful lessons; and from lessons to end at that lesson, which is the lesson of nothing else than the beautiful itself, and at last to know what is beauty itself.\textsuperscript{59}

What Socrates’ eros yearns for is the truth about beautiful things, which requires him to transcend all particular manifestations of beauty. For those willing to take such a path in order to glimpse beauty itself, those previous attachments to immortality – children of body and of soul – must be left behind. This is as it must be, for “. . . with this realization he must be the lover of all beautiful bodies and in contempt slacken this [erotic] intensity for only one body, in the belief

\textsuperscript{57} Symposium, 209e6 - 210a4..

\textsuperscript{58} This suggests that Socrates is showing, through the speech itself, an aspect of his own youthful education. To the degree to which this is true, it was necessary that he recant, or maybe be shown to recant, a dialogue with this woman who was productive of such speeches.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 211c1 - 7.
that it is petty.”⁶⁰ So too with the children of the soul, with whom those seeking true beauty must “... no longer be content like a lackey with the beauty in one, of a boy, of some human being, or of one practice, nor be a sorry sort of slave and petty calculator; but with a permanent turn to the vast open sea of the beautiful, behold it and give birth – in ungrudging philosophy – to many beautiful and magnificent speeches and thoughts.”⁶¹ Being a true philosopher, at least from what Diotima has told Socrates, requires leaving behind that which is only partially beautiful in order to learn the truth about the truly beautiful.

Diotima’s ‘ladder’ culminates in a vindication of philosophy as the highest form of eros. That eros which is most pure is an all consuming and unending pursuit of the truth about beauty which is always and forever most beautiful. Not surprisingly, this understanding of eros fits Socrates perfectly, and it is no wonder why he disagreed so strongly with Aristophanes’ speech about eros. Socrates has defended himself and his erotic tastes, just as has everyone else, and in so doing, has ushered in what we have hitherto suspected but could not prove – Socrates’ eros leads him away from the particular, so much so that he chooses to commune with perfection and eternity rather than everydayness and imperfection. Socrates’ eros is the purest philosophical eros, and thus, Socrates is the purest of philosophers.

**Socrates the Lover?**

⁶⁰Ibid., 210b4 - 5.

⁶¹Ibid., 210d1 - 6.
We are compelled at once to admit the power of Diotima’s tale, as well as the influence it clearly has. The movement from particularity to universality is an unquestioned aspect of philosophy, and by linking it to eros, she has given an erotic defense to an erotic problem. One can even take this a step further, for despite the indifference that should necessarily follow from this, the historical Socrates showed himself to encompass all three levels of loving the good as one’s own forever. Socrates was a father, having bodily children of his own. He was a molder of souls, famous for his interactions with promising young men. And he was a philosopher, one interested in transcending the level of common opinion and practice so as to get to the truth of things. In a very important way, Diotima’s speech, when put together with the superficial yet indisputable facts known of the historical Socrates, gives a profound defense of Socrates the citizen against Aristophanes’ claim of indifference and irresponsibility. Socrates was the greatest of lovers because he loved the good to be his own forever in every way open to man as man, and in so doing, became the most complete and divine of men:

‘Or don’t you realize,’ she said, ‘that only here, in seeing in the way the beautiful is seeable, will he get to engender not phantom images of virtue – because he does not lay hold of a phantom – but true, because he lays hold of the true; and that once he has given birth to and cherished true virtue, it lies within him to become dear to god and, if it is possible for any human being, to become immortal as well?’

One is almost tempted to say that Socrates, as the symbol of both eros and of philosophy, is also the symbol of man simply, and to that extent, cannot but be the model of citizenship sought by so many for so long.

62Ibid., 212a3 - 8.
Almost. Just as is it was in the *Apology*, so too in the *Symposium* do the speeches of the characters interact with the drama of the dialogue. Diotima’s tale has extolled Socrates as the best and most complete of men, as the perfect lover, and as the purest and truest philosopher. Socrates’ way of life is itself the answer to the question: What are the erotic activities? But the drama is not over, and as might be expected there is one among the audience who is not content with Socrates’ tale of self-congratulations; “When Socrates had said this, some praised it; and Aristophanes tried to say something, because Socrates in speaking had mentioned him and referred to his speech.”\(^{63}\) We must not allow the brilliance of Socrates’s tale to lull us into thinking what Socrates has said is Plato’s last word on eros. We must resist this charm if only to understand why charm is necessary. The end of Socrates’ speech ushers in the dramatic climax of the plot, and what will follow is surely important in understanding the many complexities associated with eros. Aristophanes is dissatisfied with what Socrates has said, and while we are not given the opportunity to hear him voice his dissatisfaction, we may nevertheless surmise what his objection might have been. It will suffice for now if our focus is brought to bear on two main points, both of which involve Diotima’s ubiquitous yet dubious equivalence of the beautiful with the good.

\(^{63}\)Ibid., 212c3 - 5. Notice too that Socrates’ speech does not get the same praise as had others, especially Agathon’s. Socrates cannot compete with the great poets, especially the tragedians.
If we grant for a moment that Socrates’ eros is philosophical eros proper, there nevertheless remains a sense of suspicion concerning Socrates as the complete man. Socrates longs for the good to be his own forever, and his access to forever is through his contemplation of the beautiful form. This fulfills him as a philosopher, but he also seems to recognize that concessions must be made to the other ways in which men attempt to achieve immortality. As we noted, Socrates had children, and he also attempted to inculcate virtue in beautiful young boys. He too engaged in bringing forth, and thus appeared on the surface to be the most complete of men. Yet it was in his conversation with Diotima that such practices were referred to as ‘petty’ and ‘slavish,’ and hence we are forced to wonder, using Socrates’ own question: Of what good are these creations?

To put this succinctly, why does Socrates have children or students? His eros is pure; it directs him to the never-ending pursuit of the good things to be his own forever. All erotic activities share in the beautiful because they are productive, but Socrates shares no need of the beautiful, and thus of bringing forth. And in so far as the form of the beautiful is a good thing, he longs to behold it in silent contemplation.64 This highest and most pure form of eros leads

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64“In the last stage, love of the beautiful, which includes pederasty of the body, culminates in the vision of the beautiful itself. When speaking of the higher levels, she speaks only of beholding the beautiful, not of eros for the beautiful. Why? Love of the beautiful is essentially directed toward the bodies, this must be intelligently understood.” Leo Strauss, *On Plato’s Symposium*, p. 241.
Socrates to look down upon those things that manifest beauty particularly. If we frame this in a way that has become familiar to our discourse, we are tempted to say of Socrates that he looks down upon the ephemeral manifestations of beauty, and hence, has no regard for the body. The highest point of Diotima’s ‘ladder’ is most surely a complete abstraction from the body, so much so that it invokes images of a detached Socrates floating around in a basket far above the earth. Why then, given the purity of Socratic eros, would Socrates choose to engage himself in such lowly activities, taking his mind away from what he longs and focusing it on that which it despises?

One might object at this point that we are being too harsh on Socrates. We must keep in mind, however, that in those two avenues through which immortality is achieved – childbearing and education – Socrates the man was at best only comically successful. Socrates was a notoriously bad father, so much so that he himself chose philosophy over husbandry, as he noted in the *Apology*. Moreover, Socrates’ role as an educator and molder of souls is also in doubt. Being a father and teacher involve the intermixing of body and soul, yet Socrates’ eros is a complete abstraction from the body, one that leads to a denigration of the body’s claims. It is even a strained longing for the beautiful, especially since the relationship between the good and the beautiful is still precarious. Diotima and Socrates have proclaimed Socrates to be Eros

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65 Consider the language of purity used at 211d3 - 212a2.

incarnate, an eros so untainted by the body that it is no longer erotic. Socratic eros is eros only by association; it longs for completion as does all eros, yet it shares in none of the typical erotic activities. Socrates as the complete man – father, teacher, philosopher – is indeed a problem, for his very philosophy is what makes his relationship to the family and city problematic. Now that his philosophy has been conceptualized as an erotic problem, we can see that there is something deeply troubling about how Socrates conceives of and experiences eros.\textsuperscript{67} The degree to which Socratic eros abstracts from the body is almost absurd, and we are not surprised now that the connection between Socrates’ indifference to his settings and his indifference to his body go hand in hand.

Aristophanes’ interruption made us take note of this, but we can go no further than to point out what we already knew. We are lucky, however, for we will be treated next to what

\textsuperscript{67}Gregory Vlastos gives quite possibly the most powerful voice to this sentiment when he says, “I will put all my cards on the table and say that behind this lay a failure of love. In saying this I am not taking over-seriously the prickly exterior and the pugilist’s postures. I have already argued that he does care for the souls of his fellows. But the care is limited and conditional. If men’s souls are to be saved, they must be saved his way. And when he sees they cannot, he watches them go down the road to perdition with regret but without anguish. Jesus wept for Jerusalem. Socrates warns Athens, scolds, exhorts it, condemns it. But he has no tears for it. One wonders if Plato, who raged against Athens, did not love it more in his rage and hate than ever did Socrates in his sad and good-tempered rebukes. One feels there is a last zone of frigidity in the soul of the great erotic; had he loved his fellows more, he could hardly have laid on them the burdens of his ‘despotic logic,’ impossible to be borne.” Gregory Vlastos, “The Paradox of Socrates,” The Philosophy of Socrates: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Gregory Vlastos (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), p. 17. One need only compare this sentiment with the one expressed in the last paragraph of the Preface to The Philosophy of Socrates to understand exactly what is absent in Socratic eros. The debt this study owes to Vlastos in this regard is immeasurable.
As different as they are, however, we cannot forget the similarities shared by Socrates and Aristophanes. Their closeness is precisely what makes their difference intelligible, and is certainly the reason Alcibiades utters the following words: “Socrates is here? Once again you lie in ambush; and just as is your habit, you appear suddenly wherever I believed you were least likely to be. And now, why have you come? And why did you lie down here? For it is not with Aristophanes, or with anyone else who is – or wants to be – laughable that you lie; but you managed it so that you might lie down beside the most beautiful of those in this room.”

_Symposium, 213b9 - c5._

We will hear what the student has to say about the teacher, hoping to learn not only what Socratic instruction was like, but also why Socrates was drawn out of contemplation and toward beautiful young boys.

**Alcibiades’ Speech: The Lover as the Beloved**

In a way it is proper that Alcibiades interrupts Aristophanes’ interruption. This beautiful young man, brash yet sensitive, proud yet needy, reminds us that our author has learned a great deal from his teachers. Decked with laurel hanging from his head and drunk beyond measure, the youthful and beautiful Alcibiades symbolizes the Greek god Dionysus, and one cannot help but notice the similarities between this figure and the one created by the man who has been interrupted. In Aristophanes’ _Frogs_, Dionysus descends into the underworld to bring back one of the great poets of old for the sake of the present theater, which has fallen off greatly. This sets up a contest between Aeschylus and Euripides, with Aristophanes’ Dionysus deciding in favor of the former. Here Plato’s Dionysus comes to praise the tragedian, but ends up
crowning both poet and philosopher. At the beginning of the Symposium, Agathon had proposed a contest between Socrates’ wisdom and his own tragic wisdom with Dionysus as the judge; at the end, Alcibiades, crowned with violets and ivy, and looking very much like a drunk Dionysus supported by his acolytes, gave the prize to Agathon. Socrates receives as recompense a drunken praise of his sobriety.” Seth Benardete, “On Plato’s Symposium,” *Plato’s Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 197.
the beautiful young boys of Athens? Only from Alcibiades can we really learn how Socrates comported with the youth of Athens; only from Alcibiades can we really determine whether or not Socrates was a problem.

Before proceeding with Alcibiades’s speech, let us state the problem of pederasty a bit more succinctly. As we saw in Pausanias’ speech, the motivations of the man and the boy in the pederastic relationship are not horizontal and equivalent. Instead, what brings man and boy together in an erotic relationship is different, and therein lies the problem. From the man the boy seeks wisdom and/or virtue. He wishes to gain the insights and experience that age has taught the man, all in an effort to himself become the best man possible. To use a contemporary adage, the boy seeks a mentor, someone who will aid him in the process of maturation. The boy’s motivation are only vaguely erotic, as what he desires is not being together physically, but the intellectual and experiential insight possessed by the man of age. Yet, the man’s motivations are not so clear, as he appears to desire the boy for reasons that are wholly physical. The goods that bring the two into the relationship are incommensurable, and in their incommensurability lies not the opportunity for growth, but for corruption. Thus, the Athenian laws against prostitution were clear even when the laws concerning pederasty were not, with the result that the relationship brought together two incongruent motivations in a tenuous if not dangerous way.  

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70”Athenian Society could likewise not believe that any boy simply submitted without there being something wrong with him, and a similar dichotomy governed public opinion: either it was rape or the eromenos was unmanly. A heavy stigma attached itself to the junior partner if he became known to have submitted.” Paul Ludwig, Eros and Polis (Cambridge: Cambridge
Pausanias’ solution to the problem had been to propose a change in the laws, one that made attaining gratification for the man motivated by non-physical desires both more permissible and more acceptable. His speech failed to convince, however, because the man is drawn to the boy precisely because of his beauty, and hence, any attempt to disregard the physical aspect of the man’s desire is at best a farce. This is after all an erotic relationship, especially for the man. In a way the problems faced by Pausanias are corrected by Socrates. Diotima’s tale of the highest eros suggested it longs for that which is not bodily, that which transcends anything made manifest in particularity. In its own way, Alcibiades’ speech confirms Socrates’ peculiar eros by providing us with a glimpse of that eros in action. Alcibiades tells us a tale of seduction, one where he could exchange his youthful beauty for the wisdom possessed by Socrates, thereby creating a typical pederastic relationship between man and boy; “Believing him to be in earnest about my youthful beauty, I believed I had had a lucky find and an amazing piece of good luck: I had the chance – if I gratified Socrates – to hear everything that he knew; for I used to take an amazing amount of pride in my youthful beauty.”

Alcibiades goes to great lengths to attract Socrates, playing an erotic game of sorts meant coyly to show his intent. The young man tries all sorts of techniques, beginning with wrestling and proceeding all the way to feasting and sleeping.
together. All of this fails to excite Socrates, an impasse that causes Alcibiades to come right to
the point:

‘You, in my opinion,’ I said, ‘have proved to be the only deserving lover of mine; and it seems
to me that you hesitate to mention it to me. Now I am in this state: I believe it is very foolish
not to gratify you in this or anything else of mine – my wealth or my friends – that you need; for
nothing is more important to me than that I become the best possible; and I believe that, as far as
I am concerned, there is no one more competent than you to be a fellow helper to me in this. So I
should be far more ashamed before men of good sense for not gratifying a man like you than I
should be before the many and senseless for gratifying you.’

All that Alcibiades has – his youthful beauty, his money and his friends – he is willing to give to
Socrates in exchange for his wisdom. Alcibiades desires to become the boy beloved, but his
desire is quickly disappointed.

Socrates the great lover of boys turns out to be an odd lover indeed. Alcibiades tells us of
Socrates’ response to his offer:

But when I had done this, he so far prevailed over me and despised and laughed at my youthful
beauty and committed an outrage against it (and in that regard I believed I was something special,
men of the jury – for you are the judges of Socrates’ arrogance) . . . for know well, by the gods, by
the goddesses, that though I slept the night through with Socrates I got up without anything more
untoward having happened than would have been the case if I had slept with my father or elder
brother.

The things that Socrates can get from Alcibiades – physical gratification, money, and friends – he
does not want. We see in practice how Socrates’ eros shows itself to be indifferent. He despises
the physical love of beautiful bodies as petty, seeking always to be in the company of the
eternally beautiful instead of the ephemeral beauty; “Know that he’s not at all concerned if

\[72\] Ibid., 218c5 - 218d6.

\[73\] Ibid., 219c2 - 9.
someone is beautiful – and he holds this in such great contempt that no one would believe it – any more than if someone is rich or has any other honor of those deemed blessed by the multitude."74 Socrates is, in a way, the perfect pederast, for his love of beautiful boys corrects for the problems that Pausanias faced. He does not long for physical gratification; quite the opposite, one gets the sense that he despises such bestial cavorting. We see then that Socrates’ pederasty truly is the key to his relationship with the youth of Athens, for we must understand what draws him to young boys in order to know if his relationship with them is dangerous.

Alcibiades’ speech helps us out in every respect, for it paints a picture of Socrates that not only confirms what Diotima said of philosophical eros, but also develops an explanation of why Socrates was drawn to beautiful boys. Although not fully understanding the implications of his testimony, Alcibiades inadvertently shows us the almost unimaginable degree to which Socrates’ life was consumed with desires that completely transcended the body. Alcibiades tells us, after having divulged the details of his seduction, other aspects of Socrates’ character that struck him as strange and inexplicable. Socrates was not bothered by sustained periods with no food or drink, he did not suffer from the cold or heat as other men did, he could spend long hours if not days in contemplation without getting tired, and maybe most astoundingly, he could drink without ever getting drunk.75 This strikes us as fanciful if not preposterous, yet it shows that

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74 Ibid., 216d7 - 216e3.

75 Ibid., 219e8 - 220d4.
the distinctiveness of the historical Socrates is found in his peculiarly non-bodily form of eros. It also points us back to one of the loose ends that we have thus far been unable to reconcile by again acquainting ourselves with the sister aspect of Socrates’ eros – his hubris.

Alcibiades reminds us on at least three occasions that part of what makes Socrates unique is his hubris.76 We have seen it in action most prominently when Socrates identified himself with the daemon eros, thereby making his eros the symbol of eros proper. But here Socrates the lover is in truth the beloved; he is no lover of bodies or of particular beauty. He becomes the object of affection, so much so that Alcibiades admits the sense of shame that overcomes him because he is gripped both by a passionate desire to be with Socrates as well as a profound sense of unworthiness in his presence.77 Socrates desires no particular thing or person, and he does not experience the claims that the body makes on most men. If we put together his eros and hubris, we recognize suddenly that Socrates affects the reconciliation between the good and the beautiful by doing what he did to eros – Socrates has made himself into the form of the beautiful. The form of the beautiful does not love – it is in need of nothing ephemeral. It is the object of affection, not affection itself – it draws others to it through the arousal of passion. Is this not Socrates himself? Alcibiades has told us that Socrates too does not love. No, Socrates is the

76 Cf. Symposium, 215b7, 219c6, and 221e3.

77 Cf. Symposium, 216b2 - 216c4.
beloved, the one who arouses passion in young men, and thereby becomes the object of their affection.

In the *Apology* Socrates went to great lengths to convince the jury that his way of life was not just noble, but the most noble simply. Here we see Socrates take this to a new level, yet does the same thing as before – confound the good and the beautiful for the sake ultimately of the good. His reconciliation of the good and the beautiful was tenuous because it was meant to make him both lover and beloved – to explain what he loved and how he became the object of so much affection. It was altogether proper for Alcibiades to call Socrates hubristic, for his account of eros both describes and exalts the philosophical way of life – his way of life. We are at once astounded by this revelation, for as hard as it was to understand Socrates’ almost inhuman eros, it is almost unimaginable to believe the lengths to which he has gone just to exalt philosophy and philosophical eros above all else. Yet, astounding as this revelation is, we must harness it to explain the most mysterious aspect of Socratic eros seen thus far: Why was it that

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78 We remember here that while the form of the beautiful emerges in Socrates’ tale as the peak of philosophy, it is the form of the good that is the source of all being by being beyond being in the *Republic*. Here it was natural for Socrates to reference the form of the beautiful as the highest, given the nature of the setting, but given what we have seen, it becomes clear that the Socrates of the *Symposium* and the *Republic* are one and the same.


80 We cannot help but notice the irony, and hence the humor, of making Socrates “fair and beautiful.”
Socrates, despite his radical indifference to the body, associated with young boys, and hence, became a political problem?

The reconciliation of the good and the noble was tenuous because, at its most basic, what is noble for man to do is not always what is good for him in an immediate sense, if at all. Self-sacrifice, whether it be complete as it is with war, or partial, as it is with the family, is absolutely necessary if the city is to survive. This self-sacrifice is certainly good for those in whose name the sacrifice was made, but it is not good in any real sense for the one who must make the sacrifice. No honor or lineage can makes sacrifice good in itself; quite the opposite, the noble is done precisely because it has no regard for the good. Socrates reconciles this by removing the other-regarding aspect of beauty or nobility, projecting beauty to such heights that it is purified of its relationship to the particular. But this reconciliation abstracts from beauty or nobility in such a way as to rob both of their intrinsic character. Socrates’ reconciliation is had only at the expense of what is essential to nobility, and hence we are entitled to again view Socrates with suspicion.

We began by comparing Socrates to an artist. Socrates’ relationship to Athens’ youth is much the same as an artist’s relationship to his materials. Socrates is not attracted to beautiful bodies but to the good, the good that can be his own forever. This good is his way of life, his

81 In this regard, Socrates has clearly appropriated important parts of Agathon’s speech for his own purposes. Interestingly enough, Agathon’s conception of the beautiful fits better with Socrates’ abstract eros than it does with the his own, admittedly lacking, tragic eros.
relentless pursuit of wisdom that understands its own neediness and pursues its ultimately unattainable fulfilment. But his philosophizing has taught him that his body cannot last forever, even if his eros wishes it to be. His only connection with eternity is reproducing copies of what is his own in the hopes that this good might live forever. Socrates’ eros is productive, if only in an analogous and abstracted way – in the only way possible for an eros that is divorced from the body. He seeks beautiful young boys the way an artist is attracted to beautiful new canvases. To Socrates, a beautiful boy is pure potential, something on which he might recreate the good that is his own. And because this good is his very way of life, Socrates’ comportment is that very activity which he admittedly practiced around and among the city’s youth – the art of philosophy, or dialectic. Socrates’ art, that of the dialectic, is the means through which he was able to awaken in young men their own eros, all in the attempt to set the stage for others who might be inclined to the philosophical way of life. Socrates was attracted to the young men of Athens because in them were the only opportunity available to recreate his good forever. Socratic eros does bring to birth in the beautiful in an immediate sense, but he does not love these young boys for who they are. Instead, Socrates loves the beautiful boys for what they might be, and what they might be is in fact an image of him. Socrates’ indifference, then, really is

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82 Hear what Alcibiades says about the effect Socrates’ speeches had on him: “Take me, for instance. I was bitten by a more painful viper in the place that is most liable to pain – the heart or soul or whatever name it must have – bitten and struck by philosophical speeches, which grip in a more savage way than the viper, whenever they get a hold of a young soul that is not ill-favored by nature.” Symposium, 218a2 - 6.
connected to his eros, for he loves only that which might potentially love, not because of who or what one is, but because of what one might become.

**Conclusion**

Our discussion now returns to its beginnings by asking: Did Socrates corrupt the youth of Athens? We remember that the setting of the *Symposium* occurs against two major events: the profanation of the Mysteries and the mutilation of the Hermae, and the impending defeat of the Sicilian expedition. Both of these events were linked with Alcibiades, and given what we have heard from Alcibiades himself, we can ignore neither Socrates’ motivations nor his impact on Alcibiades. Surely few possessed the abilities and promise of an Alcibiades, making the young man an immensely interesting object for Socrates’ eros. Yet there is evidence that mitigates against Socrates’ culpability with regard to Alcibiades, evidence that may vindicate Socrates of imprudence if not indifference. The mutilation of the Hermae, that event whose specter surrounded the events of the banquet, of which Alcibiades stood accused, bears a striking resemblance in its symbolism to the way in which Alcibiades describes Socrates during his speech. There is a link between Socratic eros and the corruption of Alcibiades, but it is an inverse relationship:

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83"Socrates’ interest in Alcibiades is partly intelligible in light of the nature of the young man’ eros. For Alcibiades’ love of honor manifests, albeit incoherently, an underlying desire to regard his own worth in the light of standards which are prior to, more authoritative, and more universal than, those sanctioned and sustained by indigenous customs (*nomos*).” Jacob Howland, “Socrates and Alcibiades: Eros, Piety, and Politics,” *Interpretation*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Fall, 1990), p. 79.
This incident was taken to be the most egregious case of the recklessness and disorder that repeatedly undercut Alcibiades’ genius. The dialogue will show us this recklessness as that of a certain sort of lover. The frequent references to statues are probably not accidental. The atmosphere of mock-threat and mock-violence surrounding Alcibiades’ speech goes deeper than a game, since we know it to be the speech of a man who will soon commit real acts of violence. When Alcibiades expresses anger, pain, and frustration (e.g. 219c-e, 217e-218a); when Socrates speaks of his fear of Alcibiades’ violent jealousy and even appeals for help, should Alcibiades attempt to ‘force’ him, inspired by ‘madness and passion for love’ (213d5-6); when Alcibiades says ‘There is no truce between me and you, but I’ll get my revenge on you some other time’ (213d7-8), we are surely meant to think of another time, and of an assault allegedly made against the stone genitals and the ‘wonderful head’ (cf. 213e2) of Hermes, god of luck.84

The impious events that loom large in the background of the dialogue portend the actions of a spurned lovers, not a corrupted pupil; Alcibiades’ unrequited love sends him into a jilted frenzy, causing the desecration so important to the story and for which Socrates was thought at least partly responsible. In fact the exact opposite is true; Alcibiades takes his revenge on Socrates’ peculiar eros by mutilating the erogenous areas of those statues that most resemble Socrates.

But is Socrates not vindicated by this line of reasoning? Surely one cannot fault Socrates for the impetuous actions of this bacchic frenzy? Alcibiades says himself that when he is in Socrates’ presence, he wishes to be as virtuous as possible, and Plato himself gives us two dialogues in which Socrates’ exhortation to virtue aimed at Alcibiades are clear.85 Is not Socrates the best of men and greatest of citizens precisely because his way of life was directed at those who might one day wield power? Given all of this, we must proceed with extreme caution and precision, which in this case, ironically enough, means being imaginative for a second. In a way,


85 Symposium, 216b2-8. Consider also Alcibiades I and II.
Socrates’ fate is tied to that of Alcibiades’, a premise that must be explored. Socrates’ cannot
be said to have corrupted Alcibiades because of any positive knowledge the latter learned from
the former. We have no evidence, even esoterically, that Socrates taught Alcibiades to disrespect
the laws and gods of the city. Socrates’ eros is simply too indifferent for that – he would not
have cared enough for the young man as a potential political figure to teach him such things. If
Socrates had an interest in Alcibiades, it was because he sought to understand something of him,
to learn about something in his particular soul. But Alcibiades was just sensitive enough to know
that Socrates did not care for him – to know that Socrates would eventually become the beloved,
not the lover. This was apparently too much for the young man; indignation, not virtue, was

86 Howland makes this point nicely in a slightly different but still useful context; “Victory
over the demos would have meant the birth in Alcibiades of a noble and winged eros; defeat
means that Alcibiades will become a base ‘lover of the people.’ Socrates foresees, however, that
Athens will see his paternity in Alcibiades’ tyrannical ambition. (Cf. Apology 19b4-c1 with
Aristophanes’ Clouds as a whole and Xenophon, Memorabilia 1.2.9ff.) In quoting Creon,
Socrates also seems to anticipate the manner in which his fellow citizens will interpret his
connection with Alcibiades. To the Athenians, the kinship between Socrates and Alcibiades was
evidenced by their shared irreverence for the gods of the polis. Just as Socrates was convicted
and executed of religious crimes, the Athenians’ suspicions about Alcibiades’ tyrannical hubris
were confirmed by the two criminal acts in which he was implicated: the desecration of the
Hermae and the alleged profanation of the Eleusinian mysteries.” Howland, “Socrates and

87 ‘Socrates’ philosophical eros, on the other hand, is political in just these respects.
While Alcibiades falls short of self-sufficiency in assimilating himself to the many, Socrates tests
the legitimacy of his own quest for self-sufficiency by attempting to assimilate others to himself.
In particular, he seeks out others in whom he might midwife philosophic eros because this
objectification of his own erotic pursuit would help to confirm its validity. This is why Socrates
tells Alcibiades that his own eros will be ‘tended’ or nurtured by its offspring.” Ibid., p. 85.
Socrates’ attraction to Alcibiades is similar to that of an experiment; if Socrates succeeds, he is
that much more convinced of the legitimacy of his own way of life beyond that of the alternatives. Yet one who loves rarely is satisfied with being a participant in an experiment.

If in fact Alcibiades was a lover of the demos as he himself suggests (216b6), Socrates may have been able to turn Alcibiades to a life of virtue only through the use of politically effective speech, i.e., that type of speech which is effective on the many. For reasons to be specified in a moment, however, Socrates was manifestly incapable of doing this.
dangerous of the Socratic circle. Socrates is guilty of being distant, as even he himself suggested in the *Apology*, but here in the *Symposium* we are given direct evidence from the source. True enough Socrates never meant the city harm, and he surely was not planning to set in motion events the culmination of which would lead to Athens’ demise as a true political power. But because he was completely without the feelings and attachments sought by some of those with whom he consorted, he nevertheless bears the responsibility for playing with a fire even he could not control.

Yet all is not lost, for we remember as if awoken from a dream that what we know of Socrates’ failure in one instance comes only from his success in another. Socrates may have failed in his endeavor to make Alcibiades’ into a philosopher, but he did not with regard to Plato. Socratic philosophizing can be both good and bad, harmful and helpful, but which it is depends largely on who practices it. It is only through Plato that Socratic philosophizing, and hence

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89 Hear too what Seth Benardete says about Socrates’ teacher Diotima: “Socrates mentions one disturbing thing about her: she somehow foresaw the coming of the plague to Athens and postponed it for ten years. Rather than the plague exhausting itself in an uncrowded city, Diotima’s action served to multiply its virulence when all the country people had been jammed into Athens at the start of the Peloponnesian War in 432 B.C. If Diotima had not interfered and everything else had remained the same, Athens would have almost completely recovered from the plague by the start of the war, and its outcome would fairly certainly have been an Athenian victory. Socrates reports this in the year before the Sicilian expedition and Athens’s greatest defeat. That the truth about Eros should be connected, however remotely, with these terrible events seems strange, especially since an Athenian victory in the war would in all probability have saved Alcibiades from exile and Socrates from death. The postponement of the plague recalls the postponement of the report of Agathon’s party. Could both be connected alike with the fate of Athens?” Benardete, “On Plato’s Symposium,” p. 192.
Socratic eros, attains such high esteem. Plato’s dialogues, or more importantly, his decision to write dialogues, must add something to Socratic eros that Socrates either lacked or rejected. It is sufficient to note where we started – the dialogues are written, and Socrates never wrote.

Socrates’ rejection of Aristophanes’ eros suggests a connection in principle to writing. Both Aristophanes and Plato wrote, and both wrote powerfully about the attachments that bind man because of the love of one’s own. Socrates did not write and looked down upon the love of one’s own as petty. We are thus compelled to say that Socrates’ unwillingness or inability to write is related to his rejection of the love of one’s own.

Moreover, Socrates’ inability to write must also be connected to the fact that he philosophized and had physical children, yet never created in the beautiful in the same way as the poets. Diotima’s tale told us that creation in the beautiful brought forth either physical children, or children of virtue conceived through beautiful speeches that attempted to educate. Socrates was most certainly a teacher, if only through the influence his speeches had on others, but he was no poet, and it is the poets that Diotima references as the greatest of teachers. The poets were the most erotic of child-bearers because their poetry taught virtue to the greatest number, thereby creating many noble souls. But Socrates’ art dealt with individuals, not the many, and he could never affect as many youths as did the great Homer or Hesiod. Thus there must be a connection to Socrates’ rejection of the love of one’s own and his inability to write.
poetry, that form of writing which allows erotic individuals to educates souls on a grander scale.\textsuperscript{90}

We must attempt to put together Socrates’ eros with his rejection of writing, seeing why he preferred to speak only to individuals instead of writing for the many. It is for this reason that we must now turn to the \textit{Phaedrus}, for only in this dialogue do we get a discussion not only of eros from Socrates, but also his critique of the written word.

Chapter 6: Eros, Rhetoric, and Writing

But I think you would assert this, at any rate: that every speech, just like an animal, must be put together to have a certain body of its own, so as to be neither headless nor footless but to have middle parts and end parts, written suitably to each other and to the whole.

_Phaedrus_, 264c2 - 5

The *Symposium* closes with a memorable yet enigmatic scene. After all the speeches have been made and the celebrations have drawn to a close, many of the revelers leave Agathon’s home while others fall asleep, weary from overindulgence. Only Socrates, Aristophanes and Agathon remain awake, and it is left to the three of them, one philosopher and two poets, to create what is surely one of the more pregnant conversations within the *Symposium*. Amongst the three the subject of poetry is discussed, and while we are not privy to the entirety of the discussion, it nevertheless appears as though an agreement is reached in principle:

And on awakening he saw that the rest were sleeping or had gone away; but Agathon, Aristophanes, and Socrates were the only ones who were still awake, and they were drinking from a large cup, passing it from left to right. Socrates was conversing with them. And Aristodemus said, he did not remember the other points of the speeches – for he was not only absent at the start, but was dozing – however, the chief point, he said, was that Socrates was compelling them to agree that the same man should know how to make comedy and tragedy; and that he who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic poet.1

Despite their great differences, especially with regard to eros, these men are in agreement over the nature of poetry. The greatest poet is he who is capable of producing both comic and tragic poetry, for his would be an art that encompasses all poetry, and hence, able to make men both

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laugh and weep. The *Symposium* thus ends with a poetic harmony, where comedian, tragedian and philosopher alike are brought together into a single unified whole.

Such a scene would undoubtedly be strange if not for the fact that the dialogue itself pointed toward Socrates’ peculiar eros. It is fitting that Socrates’ audience includes only Aristophanes and Agathon, for they alone signal each in their own way what is missing from Socrates’ eros. Socrates did not write and was thus no poet; his inability to write was in part the result of an erotic nature that knew little if anything of the body’s needs or desires. But the body is an important part of the human being, and any one who aspires to understand the whole of man will fail if he cannot account for the demands the body places on men. Socrates must be left alone with the poets because only the poets understand the demands the body places on man, and how without that body the soul itself becomes unintelligible. The whole of man is the

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2One might object here, if they have not already, that this study is based on a false premise – that Socrates did not write. While we possess nothing written attributed to Socrates, Plato nevertheless has Socrates say in the *Phaedo* that he did write, and that in obedience to the gods. It was necessary to wait until now to address this point, however, because the argument had to develop fully if we were to understand what this means. We have seen that Socrates did not write because he could not at the highest level, which is to say, he could not write tragedy. Compare this with what he says of his own prose in the *Phaedo*, “I began with some verses in honour of the god whose festival it was. When I had finished my hymn, I reflected that a poet, if he is to be worthy of the name, ought to work on stories, not discourses; and I was no story-writer. So it was the stories that I knew and had handy which I versified – Aesop’s, the first ones that occurred to me.” Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 61b2 - 7. Socrates is no poet; at best he is capable of adapting the works of others to suit his own needs.
intersection of body and soul, a whole that is more than the sum of its parts but which is
nevertheless not a whole without all of those parts.

To witness the final scene of the Symposium with a view to Socrates’ peculiarity helps us
focus on what remains for our investigation. The harmony that brings the dialogue to a close is
more poetic than real, as what is meant by the agreement brokered by Socrates is at best unclear.
In an apparent repetition, Socrates asserts that the man who is by art a tragic poet is also a comic
poet after he insists that the same man must know how to make both comedy and tragedy.
Without speaking to the necessity of the claim, one notices that the repetition is not, in fact,
exact, an inconsistency begging for an explanation. The first part of Socrates’ assertion, that the
same man be able to make both comedy and tragedy, collapses all poets into a single category of
producers. The second part asserts that the tragic poet is also a comic poet, but says nothing of
the opposite, that the comic poet must also write tragedy. Socrates’ repetition draws attention
to tragedy, linking it to the entire genre or genus of poetry while at the same time including within
it the comic art.3

3Hear Leo Strauss on this point: “The first statement seems to be to the effect that on the
highest level, on the level of conscious production, based of course on natural gift, the same man
is capable of both. But the second statement modifies this: it speaks only of him who is by art a
maker of tragedy as also a maker of comedy, not the other way around. This is confirmed by the
sequel. The comic poet Aristophanes falls asleep before the tragic poet Agathon. He who by art
produces tragedy, who by art can enchant men through the production of the beautiful gods, by
this very fact is disenchanted and therefore also can enchant. But the man who can disenchant,
the comic poet, is not yet, for this reason, able to enchant, to produce the gods in their awful
This assertion is not altogether surprising, as we have seen Socrates deal at length with species that are confused with the genus. What is unique is that it brings the speeches of the dialogue together within the drama of the dialogue, at once making a unified whole of speech and deed, and thereby focusing our attention toward what the dialogue has pointed. Socrates was no lover of beauty, and despite their profound disagreement as to the nature of eros, he and Aristophanes still shared much in common, much that put the two of them at a greater distance from the tragedian than from each other. Comedy and philosophy share in common the tendency to view the higher things from the perspective of the lower. Both disenchant, so to speak, for the sake of seeing through the veneer of beauty; neither comedy nor philosophy in principle are able to speak of the beautiful or the noble in their full splendor.

4The closeness between the comic poet and philosopher is one long acknowledged, but recently ignored. Our study owes a debt of gratitude to the scholarship of the past that could not forget what so many today take for granted; “As to Aristophanes, I should be inclined to regard his introduction here in the most friendly relation to Socrates, as an honourable compensation for what was said in the Apology; especially when we take into consideration the quotation from the Clouds; perhaps also to show how entirely all bad feelings had vanished in him who had in earlier times written that beautiful epigram upon the poet, notwithstanding all the satire which the latter had aimed at the philosopher.” Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato*, trans. William Dobson (Cambridge: Pitt Press, 1836), pp. 290-291. While we cannot follow Schleiermacher’s interpretation completely, his sentiments are nevertheless inspirational.

5Dover draws attention to the theatrical disenchantment affected by comedy as opposed to tragedy when he compares their means of presentation; “By contrast with tragedy, the chorus of the characters in a comedy may at any moment step half out of the dramatic roles which they are sustaining and make an explicit reference to the theatre [sic], the audience, or some other aspect of the festival. It is fair to call this ‘rupture of dramatic illusion,’ and to observe that no such rupture occurs in tragedy, provided that by ‘illusion’ we do not mean visual ingenuities of production . . . but simply the uninterrupted concentration of the fictitious personages of the
To his credit, Socrates seems aware of his shortcoming, of his inability to enchant. His repetition is in fact a nod to the power of tragedy and to the art of the tragedian. Neither he nor Aristophanes can do what Agathon can, and for that reason they cannot make a claim to the whole of poetry the way he does. Through their agreement, as well as the tacit consent of what that agreement implies, we understand a scene that is otherwise out of place or nonsensical. It is only once they are in agreement that, “they were compelled to admit this, though they were not following too well and were nodding. Aristophanes went to sleep first, and then, when it was already day, Agathon.” In an otherwise trivial point, we see the dramatic order of retiring is in keeping with the demands of the agreement. Socrates and Aristophanes’ arts are very close, and for that reason the comic is compelled to fall asleep first. In a sense, Aristophanes is no longer necessary, for he cannot add anything, and hence, cannot be the corrective to Socrates’ peculiarity. Only Agathon’s art supplies what Socrates’ lacks, and for that reason it is the tragedian alone who is the last to fall asleep under the philosophical agreement.

In a sense we are obliged to infer that Socrates’ failure to write has more to do with what is distinctive about tragedy than with the essence of comedy. One might go so far as to say that, had he wanted to, Socrates could have written, and that those writings would have been comedies; “Socrates could have written comedies, and better ones than Aristophanes, though

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play on their fictitious situation.” K. J. Dover, Aristophanic Comedy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972) p. 56.

⁶Symposium, 223d5 - 8.
probably not such tough ones. But that was not enough because it would not become a philosopher to write comedies.”” To write for the sake of writing is insufficient, however; Socrates’ eros longed for the good to be his own forever through the practice and recreation of philosophy, not to be the great teacher of virtue to the many. Socrates was no poet – his art was that of dialectics, which is an essentially private art practiced by one on another or at most a few others. Dialectics allows for the fulfilment of the life of philosophy through the pursuit of wisdom while at the same time reaching into eternity through bringing forth young would-be philosophers. Socrates could thus pick his erotic engagements and fulfill himself and his eros most completely in and through dialectics, needing no pen nor written record to complete his self-sufficiency.

Would Socrates not have been better served in his aims by having written? Surely writing is a broader form of expression than is dialectics, capable of reaching a much wider audience than he could command in person. Socrates could have addressed himself to countless numbers of potential philosophers at all times and in all places had he only availed himself of the written word. Diotima told us as much when she spoke of Homer and the poets as the great educators in virtue of the many. In the spirit of Socrates, then, we are compelled to say that his inability to write must mean either the many would not be capable of being educated to the sort of philosophical virtue he demanded, or that he could not persuade the many in the ways in which

they were open to education. It was Aristophanes who originally told us of the fundamentally closed nature of the political community – of its self-sufficiency, or from the perspective of both comedy and philosophy, of its ignorance – and thus its recalcitrance to reason. To this end, Socrates must have chosen dialectics as the only means available for fulfilling the needs of his soul.

It was also Aristophanes, however, who spoke of both the threat Socrates posed to the political community, and the threat the community posed to him. Even if the many, the demos, are recalcitrant to reason, why would Socrates, who if he differs from Aristophanes’ caricature does so only with regard to his prudence, not have attempted to educate the many? Would it not have been wise for Socrates, the unquestioned master of speeches, to have persuaded gently, and hence, educated the demos about the salutary effects of philosophy through writing? In fact, it would have been an unquestionable good for Socrates to have tried to persuade the many that he was not guilty of corrupting the youth by showing that his philosophizing posed no threat to justice if in truth it did not. Could Socrates not have shown the city his great worth while at the same time also warning it about treating its most problematic youth, such as Alcibiades, with the utmost care, just as he had done? It would have behooved Socrates to become a poet, if only for his own sake, i.e., for the sake of philosophy’s future in the city. Given then Socrates’ peculiarity, together with the enigmatic assertion at the end of the Symposium, we are compelled

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8Surely philosophy must be of some benefit, for otherwise Plato’s own enterprise would have been an evil of the first order.
to say that if Socrates did not avail himself of the means by which the political community might be persuaded or educated, i.e., those means shared in common by both Homer and Agathon, it was because he was incapable of it. Socrates could not write tragedy, and writing tragedy would have been the only form of writing of any use to him. It was Homer who was the teacher of all Greeks, and it was Agathon who won the prize the celebration of which was the occasion for the encomia of eros. Socrates gave us a brief glimpse into what is attractive about tragedy when, in cross-examining Agathon before giving his own speech, he forced the poet to acknowledge the necessity of telling half-truths, or of sometimes lying to the audience in order to win their approval. Whatever it is about tragedy that is so important to the political community – and we have yet to see what that is beyond noting the importance of both beauty and half-truths – Socrates did not possess the nature capable of producing it, and hence, could protect neither the city nor himself.9

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9As Mary Nichols makes clear, Socrates’ ambivalent relationship toward tragedy is not distinctive of the Symposium; “Consequently, poetry strengthens men’s attachments to their own and increases their hostility to whatever threatens it. Tragedy, Socrates seems to be saying, might bind men so tightly to their particular attachments and limited world that they would try to preserve them at all costs, even to the point of denying the inevitability of change or that life is worth living when change occurs. And in attaching man to his own limited connections, tragedy can attach a man to the limited world of his city. In other words, rather than leading to an acceptance of life’s incompleteness, dependence, and mortality, tragedy may produce an unshakable determination to preserve the status quo; it can lead to the very poetry that supports the city in speech.” Mary Nichols, Socrates and the Political Community (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 142.
In so far as we note what Socrates was incapable of, however, we conversely indicate what Plato himself could accomplish. Presumably the author of our dialogues did not go to the trouble to make clear why his master did not write within a written account just to prove himself inferior by writing that account. Plato must have possessed what Socrates did not, or at least was able to compensate in a way that Socrates could not, and thus supply what is missing from Socrates’ dialectics and supplied by Agathon’s tragedy. In some way, then, Plato’s writings must be able to persuade the demos of the salutary nature of philosophy, while at the same time protecting the demos from the harm that philosophy can do. Thus, it is appropriate that we are led from the dialogue on speeches about eros to the one on eros and speeches. It is to the Phaedrus that we now turn.

Setting the Stage

In many ways, the stage for the Phaedrus is set by the title. Its title refers to the man who might be called its main character, the man for whom or about whom the speeches are given. There are only two characters present in the Phaedrus, and we are obliged to treat the one who bears the name of the dialogue with utmost seriousness. Whatever this dialogue will teach us, it delivers that teaching through the lens of a discussion with this young man, whose nature is apparently essential to that teaching. Considering the Phaedrus is loosely concerned with eros and speeches – both spoken and written – we may infer Socrates’ relationship to Phaedrus tells us something about Socrates’ eros and his rhetoric. Moreover, since it is in the Phaedrus that we
find Socrates’ famous critique of writing, we are also entitled to assume that Phaedrus the
corresponding character has some significance for that critique within the dialogue that bears his name.

This is not the first time our examination has met with Phaedrus. He was a member of
the celebration at Agathon’s; in fact, Phaedrus is introduced in the Symposium as the father of the
arguments. Phaedrus wishes to eulogize Eros, and the night’s festivities take the direction they
do because of his great love of speeches. His eulogy of Eros gives some insight into his character,
for his is a eulogy much enamored of honor and heroism. Phaedrus was the one who reminded us
of the connections between eros and politics, between love and self-sacrifice. Thus, his speech in
the Symposium provides us with a valuable starting point for the Phaedrus:

The impression we get of him from the dialogue that bears his name is consistent with the one we
get from the Symposium, where he also appears in a role just short of a major character’s. There
he is the one who recommends and initiates the contest among speeches on love. His own
contribution, though, is somewhat weak and, moreover, fails his purpose since he ends up
praising the self-sacrifice of Achilles, which was commanded by his sense of honor, as greater than
the self-sacrifice of Patroclus, which was animated by his love for Achilles. We learn that
Phaedrus cannot finally acknowledge the supreme value of power of love. He is too sober for that.
This, of course, does not make him brutish or insensitive to beautiful things. On the contrary, his
tastes are elevated and urbane; he is especially enamored of brilliant speech. Phaedrus is a person
of cheerful, dispassionate urbanity. His very name suggest a sort of brightness that goes along
with the kindredness between him and the intellectuals and helps explain their fondness for him.
He is a fellow traveler among the sophist but not a highly combative one and he is well disposed
toward Socrates.

In his own way, Phaedrus is a gentleman, one who is open to the claims made by

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10 Symposium, 177d5.

philosophy but who is not himself a philosopher. Instead of being a philosopher, Phaedrus is a political man whose perspective is ultimately informed by the horizons of the city. This is not to say that his is a wholly conventional, and hence parochial, life, but it is to suggest that he, unlike Socrates, looks up to a good that cannot be, in the end, divorced from that of the city. He is a great lover of honor; his is the life that looks up to what is necessary for the city to exist. The man who loves honor is the man who understands the absolute necessity of self-sacrifice and nobility, and it is for this reason that Phaedrus is first and foremost a political man. Phaedrus’ role in the dialogue is all the more important because with him we have an example of the relationship Socrates had in private with non-philosophers – with political men. From this relationship we gain some perspective as to what Socratic rhetoric can achieve, and in turn what it cannot. Only in this way will we learn why it is that Socrates’ eros prevented him from writing tragedy.

As we have in the past, we must also note the dramatic structure of the dialogue. This has two parts. First, the Phaedrus is a performed dialogue like the Clouds and the Apology. There is no mediation by a narrator between action and audience. The Phaedrus is a play of sorts, one that allows its audience to be a direct witness to the action without inviting that audience to be a participant. Yet the Phaedrus is unique amongst the dialogues we have examined thus far, as its actions, while performed, are also voluntary. Socrates and Phaedrus converse because they chose to; there is no compulsion in their conversation. The Phaedrus similarly
shares its character with the *Symposium*; being a performed and voluntary dialogue puts the
*Phaedrus* between the *Apology* and the *Symposium* in terms of the inferences that can be made
about its teachings. On the one hand, because it is performed, it is not quite so personal, and
hence, not quite so insightful as might be expected of a narrated dialogue. On the other hand,
however, the voluntary actions that transpire will be more fitting of the characters than in a
compulsory dialogue. A narrated dialogue would be too intimate for a private conversation
between a philosopher and a gentleman, while a compulsory dialogue would be too harsh for a
dialogue concerned with eros and rhetoric. True to form, the structure of Plato’s dialogue
matches its substance perfectly.

The second aspect of the *Phaedrus*’s dramatic structure to be noted is its literary setting.
The conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus occurs outside of the city, on a walk outside
the walls of Athens. The significance of this is suggestive, as the conversation that will display

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12Hear Socrates on this point in a different context: “‘In my opinion,’ I said, ‘when the
sensible man comes in his narrative to some speech or deed of a good man, he will be willing to
report it as though he himself were that man and won’t be ashamed of such an imitation. He will
imitate the good man most when he is acting steadily and prudently; less, and less willingly,
when he’s unsteadied by diseases, loves, drink, or some other misfortune. But when he meets
with someone unworthy of himself, he won’t be willing seriously to represent himself as an
inferior, unless, of course, it’s brief, when the man does something good; rather, he’ll be ashamed,
both because he can’t stand forming himself according to, and fitting himself into, the models of
worse men. In his mind he despises this, unless it’s done in play.” Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan

13Phaedrus meets Socrates at the walls of the city because he seeks, on the advice of the
physician Acumenus, unwearying exercise on the country roads. While Socrates suggests a walk
along the Illisus, Phaedrus, barefoot in the hot summer sun, readily agrees. If shoes represent the

248
Socrates’ rhetoric on an Athenian gentleman will occur outside of Athens itself. Socrates himself tells Phaedrus, “Forgive me, best of men. For I am a lover of learning. Now then, the country places and the trees are not willing to teach me anything, but the human beings in town are.”

Socrates is normally to be found in the city where other men and their opinions are, not in the countryside where uninterrupted nature, no matter how beautiful, offers nothing in the way of learning. Socrates is not interested in nature, but in men from whom he might learn more, not only of them, but presumably of himself as well. In this way, the setting of the Phaedrus points toward an abstraction, one that must downplay the significance of the city and the opinions of its citizens. This seems proper, for a conversation showing Socratic eros and rhetoric would seem to require being outside the scrutiny of the city, much as it was with the Symposium. Yet precisely because of the peculiarity of Socrates’ eros, we are alerted to the ways in which these speeches provide insight into Socrates’ relationship with the city, especially in regard to how he was and was not able to speak to the city.

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One final observation about the *Phaedrus'* setting begs to be acknowledged. While it is true that the action of the dialogue will take place outside the city, it is not sufficient simply to suggest that its contents are a pure abstraction. Instead, we are reminded of the inspiration for that abstraction through what can only be considered a playful joke. In lieu of the city, the dialogue will take place under the shade of a very large plane tree, a *platanos*, one that inspires the usually a-natural Socrates to remark:

> By Hera, the resting place is beautiful, to be sure! This plane tree is especially wide-spreading and tall, and the height and shade of the willow are altogether beautiful, and as its flowering is reaching its peak, it makes the place as sweet smelling as can be; and in addition the stream flows most gracefully under the plane tree with especially cool water, by the testimony of my foot. It seems likely, from the maidens and other statues, to be the shrine of certain nymphs and of Achelous."\(^{16}\)

The conversation between Socrates and Phaedrus will be within a context that cannot help but remind us of our author, of the man who mysteriously hides himself behind the speeches of his characters yet oddly interjects himself onto the scene, if only indirectly. The plane tree will give birth to the discussion in much the same way as an author gives life to his writings; both provide

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\(^{16}\) *Phaedrus*, 230b2 - 230c1.
the circumstances within which beautiful speeches can be brought forth.\textsuperscript{17} As one scholar has

gracefully put it:

Any complete account of the dialogue would certainly have to be extended to treat all of the
references to the various sources of inspiration that seem to inhabit this enchanted place; of all of
these, though, surely the most outstanding one is the shade tree where Socrates and Phaedrus
settle to talk. The word for “shade tree” in Greek is \textit{platanos}, practically a homonym for Plato!
This fact has invited many speculations as to its meaning and I mean to submit one of my own.
With what is almost a mention of his own name as a power that graces and shades this
corversation, Plato invites his readers’ consideration as to how it relates to himself and his own
art.\textsuperscript{18}

No matter how enchanting Socrates’ speeches and rhetoric might be, our examination must not
lose sight of the fact that those speeches are not Socrates’. Plato shows himself to be the source
of Socrates’ written speeches, and with that revelation, reminds us of the reason for our
examination. We must now learn, to the extent to which it is possible, why it was from Plato’s
pen that we are forced to learn of Socrates’ eros.

\textbf{Part One: Lysias’ Speeches on Love}

As we turn to the contents of the dialogue, the first thing likely to strike us is the
apparent lack of unity pervading the work. The \textit{Phaedrus} appears to be a tenuous whole

\textsuperscript{17}“Say, Crassus, why don’t we follow the example of Socrates as he appears in Plato’s \textit{Phaedrus}? For your plane tree here suggests this to me, by spreading its broad boughs to shade
this place exactly like that other plane tree whose shade Socrates sought – which seems to me to
have grown not so much because of that little stream described there as owing to Plato’s own
words. But what Socrates did, despite his extremely tough feet, can more justifiably be conceded
to mine: he threw himself on the grass and there uttered the famous words that the philosophers
say were spoken in inspired fashion.” Cicero, \textit{On the Ideal Orator}, trans. James M. May and

\textsuperscript{18}Koritansky, “Socratic Rhetoric and Socratic Wisdom in Plato’s \textit{Phaedrus},” p. 34.
composed of two disparate parts whose relevance to one another is far from certain. The first part is clearly about love, composed of imaginatively adorned speeches or exhortations as to whom a beloved should gratify. Instead of his traditional dialectics, Socrates shows himself to be something of a poet, and not a poor one at that. The second part is a rather prosaic discussion of rhetoric and writing more in keeping with the normal mode of conversation associated with Socrates. Putting the two together is no easy feat, for it is not at all clear how they relate, a point not lost on a goodly number of scholars. Throughout the years many have tried in vain to provide some interpretative framework out of which the *Phaedrus*’ internal contents might be better reconciled. For example, R. B. Rutherford noted that the overarching theme of the dialogue was in dispute already in antiquity; “The ancient commentators refer to different views on the skopos (‘goal’ or ‘theme’) of the work: is it a dialogue on love, or on rhetoric? Or is its real subject ‘the good’? The Neo-Platonic Hermias quotes and endorses the view of Iamblichus, that it is a work concerning ‘that which is in every way beautiful.’” The influential Platonic scholar Paul Shorey also noted the problem, if only to suggest that its answer was in the lowering of expectations:

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19. Compare earlier Socrates’ breaking into verse, his references to Anacreon, Sappho and the poets (235c), his invocation of the Muses (237a), and in the main speech his confessedly poetic discourse, a myth about heaven and the gods which he introduces as the speech of the lyric poet Stesichorus. In short, as far as the dialogue form will allow, he is himself a poet.” R. B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato: Ten Essays in Platonic Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 262.

20. Ibid., pp. 260-261
The contrast between the classic architecture of the *Symposium* and the Gothic art of the *Phaedrus* merely expresses the fact that the two apparently distinct subject of the *Phaedrus*, love and rhetoric or literary criticism, and the variety of its motives and episodes are not combined in as obvious and harmonious a sequence and unity as are the successive speeches of the *Symposium*. It is not, for that, less interesting and enjoyable in its own way.21

And Paul Friedlander, to whom this study already owes an extraordinary debt, suggests that the speeches found in the first half of the dialogue constitute the necessary subject matter for the analysis found in the second half:

The first two speeches dealt with an assigned topic in rhetoric. If the subject matter itself took over in the third speech, this is a digression from the course, as it were, and we are brought back immediately after Socrates’ true speech on behalf of love – as Phaidros voices his doubt whether Lysias, the master in the art of rhetoric, would be able to hold his own in a contest with Socrates (257b). Thus, almost abruptly, we are forced back into the domain of formal rhetoric, and the second part of the dialogue that is now commencing will indeed use these speeches as the basis for a formal analysis in the field of rhetoric.22

Lest our examination end before it begins, we must consider if there may not be a unity within the dialogue along the lines of that proposed by Friedlander, but which nevertheless unites the dialogue in a manner in keeping with the thrust of our examination thus far. Socrates’ eros is a problem because it can neither protect the city from itself nor itself from the city. It is powerless, so to speak, in a way in which other expressions of eros, such as that of the poet, are not. The apparent antidote to this is obviously to have the power or ability to speak to or persuade the city, an ability that demanded being able in some way to write tragedy. Yet Socrates was unable to do this, and for that reason we have recourse to the *Phaedrus*, where we come in order to understand in what ways Socrates could persuade, and in turn in what ways he

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could not. It is fitting that we see in the dialogue a unity organized around rhetoric, both with a view to what Socrates could do in terms of love speeches, as well as what he understood the function of speaking and writing to be. Only in this way might we get a hint as to what he could not do, and to that end, the *Phaedrus’* internal logic seems perfectly organized. Socratic eros and Socratic rhetoric are inextricably linked, a fact that seems entirely consistent and insightful.

The first part of the *Phaedrus*, as was already noted, is composed of speeches on love—three to be exact. Of the three, the first is a speech Phaedrus has heard Lysias give and of which he has obtained a written copy.23 It is under the pretense of hearing this speech that Phaedrus has induced Socrates to follow him outside of the city; in fact, Socrates confesses to having a great weakness with regard to his love of speeches; “For just as they lead hungry animals by holding out and shaking a young shoot or some fruit, so you, stretching out in front of me speeches in books, will evidently lead me around all of Attica and anywhere else you wish.”24 This speech in particular seems to interest Socrates, as it suggests that the beloved should gratify a non-lover instead of a lover, an argument with which Phaedrus is clearly enamored. Phaedrus

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23Cicero offers this story about Lysias and his relationship to Socrates; “The highly accomplished orator Lysias even brought him (Socrates) a written speech that he could learn by heart, if he liked, and use for his defense at the trial. He read it not unwillingly and commented that it had been written in a manner that suited the occasion. ‘But,’ he said, ‘if you had brought me a pair of Sicyonian shoes, I would not wear them, no matter how comfortably and well they fit my feet, because they would be unmanly. In the same way, it seems to me that your speech is a truly oratorical accomplishment, but I don’t think it is brave and manly.’” Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator*, p. 115.

24*Phaedrus*, 230d7 - 230e2.
the character is certainly important here, as Socrates’ interest in the speech is related not only to
the position it advances, but also to the effect it has had on the young man; “. . . Phaedrus, as I
looked off upon you, in that you seemed to me, in the midst of reading, to brighten under the
influence of the speech . . .” 25 The gentlemanly Phaedrus, the great lover of honor from the
Symposium, is drawn to the speech because in a way it reflects the noble self-sacrifice to which
he is drawn. The beloved should gratify the non-lover not because of the affection the latter has
for the former, but because the non-lover is ultimately better for the beloved than is the lover.
The non-lover is free of those desires the precariousness of which makes the lover an unstable
companion. In place of love, the non-lover has virtue and stability together with a mind
unfettered by the whims of passion, all of which contribute to making him a better choice.

One can see how this speech would appeal to one taken with honor. The non-lover, like
the honorable man, does what is just and good because it is the best thing to do simply, not
because of any reward or gratification that comes from the action. In much the same way as
Phaedrus described Achilles in his speech in the Symposium, here the non-lover is that example of
pure action undertaken because it is simply proper, not because of any consideration or
compassion for others or oneself. Yet there is a paradox in this suggestion. Phaedrus is attracted
to the speech because it expresses his admiration for noble action, for action whose performance
is a good in itself. This is certainly what is required of honor, and in this instance that

25Ibid., 234d2 - 4.
requirement is transposed onto love itself – thereby requiring the highest love to be non-love. In doing this, however, the limits of honor as self-sufficient are shown, for in elevating the highest lover into a non-lover, the very action is negated into its opposite. The lover of honor is not the honorable man simply, although they may be close, for no calculation or expectation of reward can attend to the truly honorable man. No truly honorable action is done for the sake of the love of honor, which would be an ulterior motive, but for the sake of proper action – of what is simply the right or correct thing to do.

The honor that attends to honorable actions is accidental; what is essential to honorable acts is that they are done without any thought of benefit or reward. This is certainly true of nobility, which requires a self-sacrifice that is of questionable benefit to the actor, but also of a non-lover, who precisely because he does not love would only concern himself with the beloved, who in fact is not his beloved, because of some overweening maganimity or liberality. But lovers of honor such as Phaedrus also love the reputation that honor seems to attract. In this way, Lysias’ speech is related to Phaedrus himself, for in transposing honor onto love, and thus in showing the lover of honor as a lover simply, the speech shows the paradox that lies not only within Phaedrus’ soul, but also at the core of political things such as honor and nobility.

It is fitting that the *Phaedrus* provides a discussion between only two men, one of whom is a gentleman who might be called on to make a sacrifice for his city and the other a philosopher at a distance from his city precisely because of the paradox that is found in that sacrifice. What
will transpire between the two of them will be important, for it will show us to what extent Socrates can speak to gentlemen. And Socrates is intent on speaking to Phaedrus, for just as he was willing if not eager to follow him anywhere in order to hear the speech that has so captivated Phaedrus, so too is he equally ready to point out the deficiencies of that speech. Socrates is dissatisfied with the way Lysias’ has organized his speech, a fact he does not hide from Phaedrus:

In fact, Phaedrus, unless you say otherwise, he seemed to me to have said the same things two or three times, as if not altogether well provided with resources to say many things about the same subject, or perhaps as if he had no concern for such a subject; and certainly he appeared to me to act like a youth, showing off his ability to say it very well in both ways, saying the same things first one way and then another.26

Lysias’ speech has persuaded Phaedrus, yet Socrates is dissatisfied with its means of persuasion. If Socrates is to be anything more than a mere critic, he too will have to persuade Phaedrus, an undertaking he seems prepared to accept; “With my breast somehow full, demonic one, I feel that I could say, besides these things, others that are not worse.”27

**Socrates’ First Speech on Love**

The second of the love speeches begins Socrates’ foray into poetry and rhetoric through an attempt to persuade Phaedrus of his ability to persuade. Socrates agrees to offer a speech, but under one condition – that he be veiled while doing so; “I shall veil myself to speak, so that I may run through the speech as quickly as possible and may not be at a complete loss from a sense of

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26Ibid., 235a3 - 9.

27Ibid., 235c6 - 7.
shame as I look toward you.” Socrates’ actions here are odd indeed, for our Socrates is one more often than not characterized by his shamelessness rather than by his sense of propriety. We remember that it was a sense of shame that Socrates had invoked in Agathon, and that in response to telling half-truths to the many so as to win their approval. Before he begins his foray into poetic rhetoric, we wonder if there is something not true or only partially true about what Socrates will say.

In order that Socrates match the beauty of Lysias’ speech, he is compelled to speak of the same subject as had Lysias. This means that Socrates too must praise the non-lover, or more specifically, blame the actions or motivations of the lover. To do this, Socrates begins his speech with a prelude of sorts, one that casts aspersions on the author against whom he is competing:

Once upon a time there was a very beautiful boy, or rather youth, who had a great many lovers. A certain one of them was wily and, while no less in love than anyone, had persuaded the boy that he did not love him. And then came a time when, in making his demand, he was persuading him...

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28Ibid., 237a4 - 6. Listen to what Ronna Burger says about Socrates’ curious actions; “The mere rearrangement of Lysias’s speech, based on the hypothesis of its necessary argument, Socrates must deliver with his head covered in shame, as a sign of the sin he is about to commit. Socrates’ knowledge of himself enables him to recognize his sin as a lack of complete vision; in his imitation of self-binding, Socrates dramatically reveals that the appropriate punishment for lack of complete vision is identical with the sin itself. Socrates’ simulated self-binding thus serves as a warning that his first speech on eros must be understood in the context of its compulsory delivery, its attribution to a source external to himself, and its motivation by the desire to compete with Lysias for the admiration of Phaedrus.” Ronna Burger, Plato’s Phaedrus: A Defense of a Philosophic Art of Writing (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), pp. 34-35.

29Symposium, 194b6 - 194c10.
of this very thing, that he ought to gratify the nonlover in preference to the lover, and he spoke as follows:\textsuperscript{30}

Lysias has persuaded Phaedrus by making a speech of persuasion in which he the author takes the form of the non-lover, playing on Phaedrus’ love of honor. In doing so, he uses what Phaedrus truly loves against him by assuming that form most appealing to Phaedrus. The non-lover is close to the honorable man because he is said to be the one worthy of gratitude and gratification, yet does not seek nor desire these things. By doing this, by playing on Phaedrus’ love of honor and making himself as the author into a very close analogue of the object of Phaedrus’ love, Lysias has very cleverly made himself into the object of Phaedrus’ love.

Phaedrus is persuaded by Lysias that the non-lover has become the beloved, that he now loves Lysias in the same way he loves honor. But Socrates is not persuaded; he sees through the veneer of cleverly disguised love. Lysias is a lover, says Socrates, one who in order to get what he wants is willing to lie about his true motivations toward his beloved. Socrates too will blame love, but will not go so far as to disguise his own love in the process.

After this disenchanting prelude, Socrates offers his blame of love. In order to praise or blame love correctly, we must know what it is about which we speak. What we are seeking is, “. . . the desire without reason which masters the opinion striving toward what’s correct and is led toward the pleasure of beauty, and which, in turn mightily gaining strength from desires that are

\textsuperscript{30}Phaedrus, 237b2 - 7.
akin to itself toward the beauty of bodies, conquers in its leading, taking its name from this very
might, is called love."

This desire, which overpowers the rule of correct opinion, leads the lover
to desire the beloved in such a way as to be harmful to the beloved. Because desire hates
resistance, and because what is stronger or equal provides resistance, the lover seeks to make the
beloved weaker, cowardly, and dull. The result of this is obvious, and Socrates ends his blame
of love with a rather icy picture; “These things, then, you must meditate on, my boy, and know
that the friendship of a lover does not come into being with goodwill, but in the manner of food,
for the sake of repletion, as wolves cherish lambs, so do lovers love boys.

Socrates’ blame is most powerful, and has the intended effect – it persuades Phaedrus of
Socrates’ ability to persuade. By first dispelling the pretenses of Lysias’ speech, and then
providing his own speech that excels that of Lysias, Socrates has successfully gained a hearing for
himself as a poet. More than that, Socrates has endeared Phaedrus to him through his speech-
making ability, a victory that shows in part the power and effectiveness of Socrates’ rhetoric. In
blaming eros, however, Socrates has also subtly blamed Phaedrus twice over. Socrates’ blame of
love condemns the naiveness of Phaedrus as a lover, for in his love of honor he has allowed
Lysias to fool him into becoming his beloved. The effects of this are clear – Phaedrus’ naiveness

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31 Ibid., 238b9 - 238c4.
32 Ibid., 238e2 - 239a5.
33 Ibid., 241c7 - 241d2.
with regard to Lysias’ intentions will ultimately be harmful to him as the beloved. This shell game of lover and non-lover has all been a ploy, and Phaedrus’ admiration for it shows just how powerful its cleverness has been.

**Socrates’ Second Speech on Love**

Socrates’ second speech is by far the longest of the dialogue, and with that length comes an incredible complexity that shows Plato to be more than an able poet. It is also a speech that, much as the dialogue itself has, befuddles many scholars who look for a coherent argument. For our own analytical purposes, Socrates’ second speech may be divided into eight separate parts, the first seven of which form a rhetorical whole, and the eighth adding another dimension to our understanding of Socratic eros and rhetoric. Socrates has succeeded in gaining a hearing for himself at Lysias’ expense, and with this opportunity he turns to persuading Phaedrus of the benefits of love, not its harm. To do this, Socrates must exalt love – to praise its beauty as well as the role it plays in the human soul. To do this our philosopher will use his rhetoric to persuade the lover of honor that the highest form of love, that which is most beautiful and most fulfilling, is the love of wisdom.

The first part of Socrates’ second speech is to change unequivocally the notion that love is harmful; “the speech is not genuine which asserts that, when the lover is around, one must rather gratify the nonlover, on the grounds that the one is mad, the other of sound mind. For if it were simply the case that madness is something bad, it would be beautifully said; but as things
are, the greatest of good things come into being for us through madness.” 34 Instead of being detrimental to man, love is in fact his greatest gift, for it is from love that the greatest goods come. Among these greatest goods are prophecy, music, and poetry, all instances of the highest form of love – madness – which enables the communication between man and the gods. 35 Eros, in its highest form, is connected with both the gods and with poetry, a connection that not only produces offsprings, but also educates them. This is a point Socrates has made repeatedly, and here he counts the works of the poets, which, “. . . adorns ten thousand works of the ancients and so educates posterity,” among the greatest of human achievements. 36 Socrates’ first step into the praise of love is to praise that with which Phaedrus is already acquainted, and thus to gain himself a firmer hearing from the impressionable young man.

The second part of the speech is more cosmic in scope, as Socrates links the highest forms of eros with the divine in a more direct way. He does this first through an elaborate myth that seeks to establish the immortality of the soul:

All soul is deathless. For that which is always moving is deathless; and that which moves something else and is moved by something else, since it has a stopping of motion, has a stopping of life. Only that which moves itself, then, since it does not abandon itself, never ceases from moving, but this is also the source and beginning of motion for whatever other things are moved. A beginning has not coming into being. For every thing that comes into being must of necessity come into being from a beginning, but the latter must not come from anything, for if the beginning came into being from something, it would no longer be a beginning. Thus, then, that very thing that moves itself is the beginning of motion. . . Now, since that which is moved by

34 Ibid., 244a3 - 8.

35 Cf., Symposium, 202e4 - 203a8.

36 Phaedrus, 245a4 - 5.
itself has been revealed as deathless, one will feel no sense of shame in saying that this very thing is the essence and rational account of the soul.\textsuperscript{37}

As a beginning of motion able to move itself, the soul participates in immortality through its eternal motion. In this respect, the immortal human soul is much like the gods, able to move itself eternally with no beginning or end. Yet man is not merely soul; in fact, he is a mortal being that also participates in death, a phenomenon unknown to the gods. This duality requires Socrates to move from the second part of his speech to the third, which describes how the soul becomes joined together with the mortal body.

All immortal souls, divine and human, are, “. . . like some naturally conjoined power of a winged team and a charioteer. Of the gods, then, the horses and charioteers are all good themselves, and of good ancestry, but as regards the others, there has been a mixture.”\textsuperscript{38} This third part of the speech suggest that, to the degree to which the human soul is like the divine, it is perfect, “and so when it is perfect and winged, it travels on high and governs the cosmos.”\textsuperscript{39} The human soul outside of the body is an abstraction, if by abstraction we mean divorced from any body. In this regard, it communes with the divine in the heavens and is sovereign over the whole. But humans are not gods, and their souls, while possibly still immortal, nevertheless do partake of the particular. In fact, the human soul is joined together with the human body only when the

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 245c7 - 245e5.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 246a6 - 246b1.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 246c1 - 2.
\end{enumerate}
soul itself loses its perfection; “... but when it has lost its wings, it is borne on until it lays hold
of something solid, and having settled down there and taken on an earthly body, which itself
seems to move itself through the soul’s power, the whole thing together, soul and body, stuck
fast, is called living being and has the surname mortal.”

The joining together of the body and the soul is the occasion of the soul losing its wings.
The fourth part of the speech is Socrates’ explanation of how the soul parting with its wings and
losing its perfection. The immortal gods and souls in the heavens lead a blessed life, traveling in
an arch toward the summit of the whole, outside of which is true, unadulterated being. This
place, which is at once pure being and beyond being, is the object of soul, divine and human, as in
it exists the nourishment for all soul:

As for the place above the heavens, no poet from among those here has yet sung or ever will sing
of it as it deserves. This is how it is — for one must indeed dare to say what is true, especially
when one is talking about the truth — to wit, really existing being, colorless and shapeless and
impalpable, visible to the mind alone, the soul’s helmsman, with which the class of true
knowledge is concerned, occupies this place.

The human soul is divine when it communes with the gods, but it is most divine when it has as
its object that which even the gods seek. The human soul is not wholly divine, however, because
it lacks the power and ability to live the life fit for a god. It is this shortcoming of the human soul
— its own weak memory — that forces it to lose its wings, thereby causing the soul to be joined
together with the body:

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40 Ibid., 246c2 - 6.

41 Ibid., 247c4 - 247d1.
But when, lacking the power to follow, it does not see and, having experienced some mischance, filled with forgetfulness and badness, it is weighed down, and having been weighed down it loses its wings and falls toward the earth, then the law is that this soul shall not on its first coming into being implant in any bestial nature, but the one that has seen the most things shall implant in that which will engender a man who will become a philosopher or lover of the beautiful or someone musical and erotic . . . \textsuperscript{42}

It comes as no surprise that the fifth part of the speech is a list of souls ranked with regard to how much memory, and hence how much of true being, remains once the soul becomes mortal. What is a surprise, however, is the actual ranking of the list. Socrates began his speech using prophecy and poetry as the means by which he might persuade Phaedrus of the benefits of love. In this list, prophecy and poetry stand only fifth and sixth respectively, a far cry from what was previously described as the greatest good for mankind. Now, instead of prophecy and poetry, philosophy has ascended to the pinnacle of human experience, being at once the most wise and divine.\textsuperscript{43} Socrates started out to praise love and has ended up praising philosophy, which had not been mentioned before. It is for this reason that the sixth and seventh parts of Socrates’ speech seek to tie together eros and philosophy, especially as they relate to benefit.

There is another form of madness, aside from prophecy, music and poetry that is also divine. In truth, this fourth form is the most divine of madness; it alone is the only access the human soul has to the vision of beauty it once beheld. This forth form of madness is the love of

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid., 248c6 - 248d5.

\textsuperscript{43}Much as it was in the \textit{Symposium}, Socrates employs his rhetoric with a view to including philosophy among the different manifestations of love, only to use the hearing he gains to elevate philosophy as the highest form of love.
beauty, for through beauty alone is the soul reminded of the unparalleled visions it once knew; “. . . that this, therefore, proves to be of all inspirations the best and of the best ancestry, both for him who has it and for him who communicates a share of it, and that he who participates in this madness, as one who loves the beautiful ones, is called lover.”⁴⁴ The most divine madness is the greatest of goods because it draws the soul to that which reflects, however dimly, the eternal sublimity of true being. This lover, the most favored among the gods, is the only mortal capable of reaching true happiness, as he is the only one able to remember the time when his soul was pure and uncorrupted by body; “and the man who correctly uses such reminders, always fulfilling perfect rites – only he becomes really perfected. Standing back from matters of human seriousness and coming to be near the divine, he is rebuked by the many as moved out of his sense, but that he is inspired by god escaped the notice of the many.”⁴⁵

The true lover of beauty is the one moved by the beautiful to remember the vision of pure being it once beheld. Beauty, then, is the stimulus of philosophizing, for it is through the beautiful that we are able to partake again of the wings that once lifted our immortal soul. But Socrates chooses his language carefully, and it is the symbolism he evokes that helps to cement the rather abstract relationship that beauty and eros have to philosophy. Listen to the imagery

⁴⁴Phaedrus, 249e2 - 5.
⁴⁵Ibid., 249c8 - 249d4.
Socrates uses to describe the experience of philosophy as it emerges from the love of the beautiful:

Receiving through the eyes the efflux of beauty, by which the wing’s nature is watered, he is heated; as he is heated, the parts around where it would grow out, which, shut up with stiffness, formerly barred it from budding, melt; and as the nourishment flows in, the wing’s shaft swells and starts to grow from the root, under the soul’s whole form – for the whole soul was formerly winged. Then the whole soul boils in him and seethes. And the soul of him who is beginning to grow wings experiences the same experience that happens around the teeth to those cutting teeth, when they are just growing them – itching and irritation around the gums: it boils and is irritated and tickles around the growing wings. Now then, whenever the soul, looking upon the boy’s beauty and receiving particle that come upon it and flow from there (indeed, on account of these things, it is called “longing”), is watered and heated, it abates from its distress and rejoices.46

In order to make clear the relationship between eros and philosophy, Socrates employs highly charged, if not sexually lewd language. The experience of philosophy, according to Socrates, is erotic, yet it is an eros that shows itself to be abstracted from the body in an altogether familiar way. Socrates has transposed the language of human eros onto the myth of immortality, the gods and pure being so as to make philosophy into the highest calling for man. In one grand poetic gesture, Socrates’ second speech has praised love by making the object of love wisdom, which is the greatest good for mankind and the most holy of the divine gifts, and hence, turns his speech into a praise of himself and his way of life as the highest simply.

We have come far enough, however, to know that there are problems associated with treating eros as an abstraction from the body. Socrates’ elevation of philosophizing comes at the price of denigrating human eros and all that attends to it. Socrates describes those who do not philosophize in a way that is now all too familiar:

46Ibid., 251b3 - 251d.
Now then, he who is not newly initiated or has been corrupted is not quickly carried from here to that place toward beauty itself, when he has beheld its namesake here, and in consequence he does not feel awe as he gazes at it; but giving way to pleasure after the custom of four-footed beasts, he endeavors to mount and to sow children, and mingling with wantonness he feels neither fear nor shame at hunting pleasure contrary to nature.47

The true eros is that which has no regard for the body, while that which longs for particularity is bestial and contrary to nature. It also does not surprise us that Socrates’ divine eros is divorced from its surrounding, divorced in a way that haunts us as if from the past:

From this, to be sure, it is not willing to be separated; nor does it make more of anyone than of the beautiful one, but forgets mothers and brothers and all comrades; and when its property is destroyed through neglect, it sets that down as next to nothing; despising all the conventional customs and graceful refinements, on which hitherto it prided itself, it is ready to serve as a slave and to sleep wherever one allows, nearest its yearning.48

The Socrates of the *Phaedrus* is no different from the Socrates of the *Symposium*; they are both lovers of wisdom and indifferent, if not contemptuous, of those whose eros finds its home in particular people, families, and cities. The more abstracted eros is from the body the better, leading one to infer from the myth that all ways of life point up to him who is most divorced from the needs of his body. The majority of Socrates’ second speech, then, has been an attempt to persuade Phaedrus of the philosopher’s praiseworthy and divine way of life.

Before moving to the eighth and final part of Socrates’ second speech, as well as the end to the first half of the dialogue, it is necessary to pause for a moment to reflect on what we have just witnessed. As we noted earlier, Phaedrus is a lover of honor. But as a lover of honor, he is

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47Ibid., 250e - 251a2.

48Ibid., 252a1 - 252b1.
not the honorable man per se, although he might come to be. The lover of honor is essentially a lover of gain, as he is enamored of the benefits that attend to honor. Yet he also assumes honor in a way, since not every action undertaken that may procure honor is necessarily in itself honorable. A man who attains honor may do so in an ignoble way, but if he is clever enough his dishonorable conduct may escape notice, giving him the benefit without the sacrifice. This is surely not what Phaedrus loves, and because of this he is a decent man, one who expects good things for those who do what is noble for the sake only of nobility. But in as much as he is the lover of honor, a tension arises between the lover and the beloved, one that goes to the very core of all morality.

The truly honorable man acts honorably simple because it is the honorable thing to do. A soldier who sacrifices himself for his comrades on the battlefield acts nobly not because he seeks immortal fame or glory, but because his self-sacrifice is simply proper. For this very reason, however, the honorable man is not the lover of honor – his motivation has nothing to do with any considerations of gain or benefit. But because of this, he is also something of an abstraction in that he has no motives for acting nobly or decently at all. There is no final benefit that accrues from his actions; true nobility shows itself only when self-sacrifice is pushed to its logical conclusion. The paradox that lies at the heart of honor also lies at the heart of every virtue that entails self-sacrifice – the pure embodiment of morality is as un-bodily as is Socrates’ eros.49

49In a slightly different context, Allan Bloom makes this interesting remark about love’s relationship to virtue; “Although he tries to maintain the notion of moral dignity, his view is in
Socrates has seen the paradox within Phaedrus’ soul; the young man longs for that which does not love him back, and which, in the end, cannot be his fulfilment. Honorable and noble actions may be honorable and noble, but they cannot be fulfilling, for if they were, they would not be true virtue, but instead actions animated by a love of gain masquerading as the love of honor.

Phaedrus truly is the political man in an important sense because his love is for the city, for justice and the noble itself. But the city is more than the man; the city is the horizons of man within which man finds his home and takes his bearings. Phaedrus is the perfect gentleman, or at least may potentially be the perfect gentleman, because he understands his good to be one and the same as the city’s good, even if such a thing is ultimately not possible. It is for this reason that Socrates shows such an interest in this young man.50

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some sense low because he sees no profit in decency. He is forced to say that there are good goods and bad goods, and bad goods are those which are profitable but not such as are pursued by decent men. But decency is then without motivation; astonishingly, the companion’s morality is like Kant’s. Socrates, on the other hand, insists that all desire and action must be motivated by desire to possess the good; good and bad men are not distinguished from one another by the latter’s caring for their own good while the former do not.” Allan Bloom, “The Political Philosopher in Democratic Society: The Socratic View,” *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic Dialogues* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 42. As a lover of honor, Phaedrus is a lover of the gain that accrues to the honorable reputation. At this level, he remains political, but if Socrates can make him aware that he is really a lover, he might be opened up to questions of the good, and hence, philosophy.

50It is also for this reason that the political life itself is no alternative to the philosophical way of life. There is no reconciliation between the good and the noble to be had at the political level, for such a reconciliation demands a standard to which the polity itself appeals. Such a reconciliation is possible only through philosophy as a way of life or the obedience demanded by faith; “Man cannot live without light, guidance, knowledge; only through knowledge of the good can he find the good that he needs. The fundamental question, therefore, is whether men can
acquire that knowledge of the good without which they cannot guide their lives individually or collectively by the unaided efforts of their natural powers, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on Divine Revelation. No alternative is more fundamental that this: human guidance or divine guidance.” Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 74.
regard to Socratic philosophizing, then, there is no moderation to be had – the inexorable pull of philosophy knows no limits. Moderation is the virtue of the city because the city is the home of non-heavenly eros, the eros of beasts. Those who philosophize want something they might possess, and they want it to be their own. When man sets his sights on bodies instead of being, his eros draws into itself an object that is at once both tantalizing and dangerous. The love of a particular object as one’s own brings necessarily a claim that the object remain one’s own forever. Out of this longing for abiding possession thus arises a claim on that object, a claim to have an exclusive right over that object as singularly one’s own. The love of one’s own thus culminates in possessions or in possessiveness, the logical conclusion of which gives rise not only to families, but to private property. It is for good reason that Socrates suggests the true lovers of beauty will leave behind the family and the city.51

Moderation, according to Socrates’ description of eros, is ultimately a political virtue, for it is the way in which men, coming together in need of one another, ensure their gregariousness through the harmonization of competing claims for one’s own:

Human beings desire certain objects with a passion that could be described as erotic. Their desire they take to be ‘just,’ and they are led by it to conclude that they have a right, as we would say, to the objects of their desire. Since human beings agree by and large about what is desirable, they fight over the possession of those things and hence over conflicting views of justice. Their appeals of justice may mask a certain selfish hypocrisy, but it is not a hypocrisy of which they are necessarily aware. It remains true, however, that, not having thought seriously about the question, and about what truly can be said to belong to them, they do not ‘know’ about justice.52

51Cf. *Phaedrus*, 252a1 - 252b1.

The city’s laws, and most significantly, its justice, are the products of the city’s attempt to leverage those competing claims – to adjudicate between many men’s eros, all of which seek particular objects as their own. This moderation – justice most simply if you will – lies at the heart of the political, as the legal identification of what is acquired and possessed rightly. Yet the true lover, the lover of the good that transcends the particular, has no moderation, as his desire is for his own good, a desire that knows no limits and which does not seek to acquire those things over which most men might have competing claims. Hence, the true lover has no intrinsic respect for the family, private property, or even the city for that matter. It is for this reason that philosophy is always in tension with the city, and why Socrates, no matter how prudent he might have become, was nevertheless a problematic citizen.

The importance of Phaedrus as the dialogue’s main character is thus made manifest through his status as a gentleman, i.e., as the intermediary in some sense between the philosopher and the many. Socrates cannot speak to the many, and while the reason for this remains to be seen, what is now indisputable is that he could speak to the few. Phaedrus, like Socrates, is no lover of bodies per se. As a lover of honor, he looks up to that which transcends bodies, that in whose beauty the self-sacrifice of body is made possible. He is the perfect subject for Socratic rhetoric, as he is open to the possibility of a love whose object lies wholly outside of the body.53

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53 Seen in this way, Phaedrus represents a more promising candidate for Socrates’ rhetoric than did Alcibiades.
Socrates is able to convince him by cleverly playing with the myths of the city while substituting divine philosophy for honor as the pinnacle of human existence. Our philosopher has persuaded a gentleman, one who himself might be able to speak to the many, but who is nevertheless open to the claims made by philosophy. It is for this reason that the eighth and final part of Socrates’ speech is brought about, for it shows how Socrates sees his status within the city, and how he might make that status more salutary both for himself and on behalf of the city.

The final part of Socrates’ second speech is a rather abrupt restart, one that returns to an image Socrates used previously but had not explained. When describing the immortal soul, Socrates suggested each soul was like a chariot, possessing one charioteer and two horses. Now, after explaining the workings of the soul and the cosmos, Socrates returns to the image of the chariot with renewed emphasis. In some sense, this is to be expected, as the vivid imagery better illustrates how a budding philosophical soul is taught to see in beautiful bodies what they truly desire – an image of the beautiful itself, and thus to explain how it is that a lover of beauty is one completely uncorrupted by bodily eros. Yet, in another way, the particulars of the imagery in question are altogether odd and beg for another explanation that can account for Socrates’ intentions with regard to Phaedrus. Take, for example, Socrates’ description of the two horses yoked together, a description sure to arouse the wonder of those already suspicious of Socratic rhetoric:

Well then, of the two, the one in the more beautiful position is straight in form and well jointed, somewhat hook nosed, white to the sight, black eyed, a lover of honor with moderation and with a sense of shame, and a comrade of truthful opinion, unbeaten, guided by command alone and
speech. The other, in turn, is crooked, big and black skinned, gray eyed, bloodshot, a comrade of wantonness and boasting, shaggy about the ears, deaf, barely yielding to the whip and goads.54

A white horse who is a lover of honor with moderation and a sense of shame, and guided by command and speech? And a black horse, snub nosed and randomly slung together, full of wantonness (shamelessness) and boasting (pride)? Surely this is a joke, for Socrates seemingly intends to end his second speech by yoking himself and Phaedrus together as twin images of the soul. This image, which identifies Socrates with the desirous part and not with reason, is indeed curious, if only because we see Socrates cast himself in a rebellious, if not unflattering, posture:

If the dark horse is by nature a rebel, the white horse is by convention a gentleman and good citizen of the polity of the soul. While the dark horse seems to be Socrates' image of himself, the white horse displays its unlikeness to Socrates through its role in the erotic experience; the white horse, tall and beautiful, is the beloved, only dragged by his rebellious partner into the activity of a lover. Ruled by the fear of shame and the love of honor, the white horse seems to represent the hidden presence of politically determined opinion in the individual soul. The white horse is, then, an image of Phaedrus' soul, into which Socrates looks, as in a mirror whose reflection is distorted by its own qualities, to see himself; the inclusion of the white horse in Socrates' image of the soul demonstrates the connection between his art of erotics and his pursuit of self-knowledge.55

Moreover, the image is rife with struggle, as Socrates explains the conflict between the black horse, on the one hand, and the charioteer and the white horse on the other hand:

And upon seeing, he is afraid and, feeling awe, recoils on his back, and at the same time is compelled to pull the reins back so vehemently, that both horses sit down on their haunches, the one willingly through not striving against it, the wanton one very unwillingly. As the two withdraw farther off, the one soaks the whole soul with sweat from shame and amazement; the other, ceasing from the pain that it had from the bit and the fall, barely catching its breath reviles them in anger, badmouthing the charioteer and its yoke-mate in many ways, on the grounds that through cowardice and unmanliness they quit the rank and the agreement.56

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54Phaedrus, 253b4 - 253e4.


275
The key to understanding this complex imagery lies in the identification of the charioteer, who somehow commands the white horse willingly yet is at pains to control the black horse. Given what we have seen of Socrates’ rhetoric, we are compelled to say that the charioteer can only represent the city, and the image to which we have returned is one depicting Socrates’ tension with his political community.57 The lover of honor is more closely aligned with the city than with the true lover of beauty, and while it may be true that the two horses are alike in an important way, it is nevertheless also true that the white horse will always be closer to the charioteer than to the black horse.58

The rest of Socrates’ second speech goes on to show how it is that a true lover, attracted to a beauty because of the divine image he sees, is able to turn the beloved himself into a lover. This is perfectly Socratic, for, as we have seen, the only way around the incommensurable desires in pederasty is when the lover does not love the boy himself, but instead what the boy represents or might become. But the core of the image, the soul as a chariot, is powerful – in it we see both the tension between philosopher and city as well as the similarities between philosopher and gentleman that make the latter at least theoretically open to the claims of the former. Phaedrus is inextricably linked to the city, and because in the end the horizons of the


58 Cf., 254a1 - 2. The white horse too is a lover, but one whose opinions about love are understood ultimately in relation to the charioteer, much as the political man’s eros is circumscribed by the horizons of the city.
city are Phaedrus’ horizons, he must obey the commands of the charioteer. Being a lover, however, makes him open to the claims of philosophy, and in this way he is the perfect subject for Socratic rhetoric. If Socrates is to persuade him of anything, nay, if the philosopher is going to persuade the city of anything, he must or can only do so by persuading those gentleman whose openness to philosophy might translate into influence on the city.

In a way, Socrates’ speech does this quite well, as he has surely convinced Phaedrus that the roots of justice are found in the divine, and only the philosopher has a divine calling. Conversely, the roots of injustice are found in the particular, in the petty love of bodies that gives rise to law’s necessity, as well as to the human form of moderation under which Socrates chafes and is hindered. In a sense, and a very important one at that, Socrates is a good citizen, for he has attempted to persuade this important young man with reference to the myths of the city with which Phaedrus identifies. If Socrates is to succeed, however, he must not only pay lip service to those myths, but must also demonstrate in practice the salutary effects of philosophy for the city. This requires that he not only moderate the claims out of which injustice arises, but also supplement, in whatever way possible, the justice demanded by the city. This, of course, is what is required of those who must speak and educate the many, and is the reason why the dialogue next turns to an examination of rhetoric proper.
Part Two: Speeches on Rhetoric

The second half of the *Phaedrus* can be divided into two parts: the first a discussion of rhetoric’s nature and its status as an art, and the second a discussion of what is required to write well. The first half of the *Phaedrus* sets up a demonstration of Socrates’ rhetorical skills, especially as those skills can be used to convince a few select listeners. In so far as it showed his ability to persuade, however, the first half of the dialogue demonstrated in action what Socrates presumably sets up in the second half to discuss dialectically. If this is not to be a mere reiteration of what has come before, Socrates will have to provide fresh insight. Socrates’ analysis of rhetoric should show the limitations of Socrates’ own speeches, albeit indirectly, making clear why he could not speak to the many, hence why he could not write tragedy, and hence why he did not write.

To assume such a stance would be a bit far-fetched if not for the fact that the second half of the *Phaedrus* begins with a reassertion of the city’s relevance. Socrates’ rhetoric has been so successful on Phaedrus that the latter openly admits Lysias would be hard pressed to compete with it. Yet even if he were inclined, Lysias has of late been reviled for his speech writing by a politician, an indictment that has caused him to rethink his endeavors. Lysias’ indictment would appear as a rather odd conjunction between the previous speeches and the present conversation except that the speech writer’s relationship to the city serves as a perfect bridge to Socrates’ own

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59 *Phaedrus*, 257c3 - 5.
political rhetoric. That we may find the shortcomings of his rhetorical abilities is made clear when Socrates dismisses the indictment of Lysias’ craft as ridiculous, thereby suggesting the link between what will follow and his own understanding of rhetoric. And what follows is Socrates’ suggestion that the rhetorician, or the maker of speeches, is essentially the same as the writer of speeches, and that both are of the same species as he who also makes and writes laws.60

The link between the first and second halves of the book also supports the assumption that Socrates’ analysis of rhetoric provides a clue into his own political shortcomings. When asked by Socrates if they have some need of examining the manner of writing beautifully, Phaedrus, in a way suggestive of the influence Socrates has wielded over him, replies:

Are you asking if we have a need? For the sake of what, then, would someone live, if I may say so, but for the sake of such pleasures? Not, I suppose, for the sake of those that one must feel pain beforehand or else not feel pleasure, which is the case for nearly all pleasures involving the body; wherefore, and justly so, they have been called slavish.61

The gentlemanly Phaedrus now harbors a certain animus for the body and its associated pleasures, a fact not lost on Socrates. Socrates takes the opportunity afforded by Phaedrus’ incredulity to further their poetic partnership by suggesting again a common endeavor over and against the many; “if, then, they should see the two of us too, just as the many, not conversing at high noon but dozing and bewitched by them through idleness of thought, they would justly laugh at us, thinking that some slaves had come to their little resting place just like little sheep to

60Ibid., 258b10 - 258c4.

61Ibid., 258e1 - 6.
sleep at high noon by the spring." Socrates has played upon Phaedrus’ noble sentiments by linking together the young man’s disdain for the body with the practices of the many. Phaedrus now shares Socrates’ disdain for the many, a symmetry surely related to Socrates’ divine rhetoric. This suggests the validity of our assuming Socrates’ rhetorical impotence might be found in his analysis of rhetoric. If that were not the case, the great feat of persuasion Socrates has just demonstrated would have no relevance with regard to the question of speaking and writing.

The first part of the Phaedrus’ second half asks the question of what it is to write beautifully, to which Socrates responds by raising the question of what art is, especially as it applies to rhetoric. Socrates is intent on requiring of rhetoric that it know those things of which it speaks if it is to be used properly, a requirement with which Phaedrus is not altogether certain. With this requirement, Socrates cleverly inserts knowledge of the subject as the essential aspect of speaking, an assertion that rules out the possibility of mistakes or unintentional deception on the part of the speaker. The true rhetorician is one who knows of

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62 Ibid., 259a1 - 6. Socrates also goes on to demand of rhetoric that it have a private as well as public dimension. For reasons that are probably not immediately clear to him, but which nevertheless add suspicion to what Socrates is doing, Phaedrus is unconvinced of rhetoric’s private dimension.

63 Ibid., 259e1.

64 Ibid., 260a

65 Ibid., 262b6 - 262c3.
what he speaks and to what degree it concerns questions of the just or the good, those things about which there is much disagreement.\textsuperscript{66} With knowledge of these things the true rhetorician composes speeches and writings that are unified wholes, works whose every part goes together in just the way it must and is intended.\textsuperscript{67} In requiring of rhetoric that it be a true art, Socrates has elevated the status of rhetoric such that its practice is the purview of a select few.

Socrates effectively appropriates the art of speaking and writing to himself alone when he demands of rhetoric that it possess both skill and knowledge, art and science. This art of speaking has within itself the power to understand things as they are by seeing within diversity one idea, and conversely by cutting one thing apart into many forms.\textsuperscript{68} Taken together, these two powers form the essence of rhetoric, an essence that is also dialectical; “furthermore, those who are able to do this – whether I address them correctly or not, god knows, but however that may be, so far I call them dialectical.”\textsuperscript{69} Socrates’ characteristic method of inquiry has become the substance of true rhetoric without which proper speech and writing are impossible.

To be sure, our Socrates is not one possessed of much shame, but to suggest that he himself is the only true possessor of the ability to speak and write properly is a bit much even

\textsuperscript{66}Ibid., 263a2 - 12.

\textsuperscript{67}Ibid., 264b1 - 264c5.

\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 265d4 - 266b2.

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., 266b4 - 11.
for him. Socrates the philosopher is also the only true speaker, a conclusion with which we must immediately disagree if only because we know of his own inability to persuade the many, an ability that must be of utmost importance to the whole of rhetoric. We are forced to ask then what relevance this equation of rhetoric and dialectic serves, and are forced in turn to answer with what has transpired in action. Socrates’ attempt to persuade Phaedrus of the philosophical way of life’s supremacy has been based on an element of subterfuge, and to that end, we see in a negative way that the equation of rhetoric and dialectic indicates rhetoric’s need of deception. Socrates made mention of this when he discussed the role likenesses played with regard to the just or the good, i.e., subjects of disagreement.70 Deception is an integral part of rhetoric, especially in so far as it can be employed to persuade persons private or public, if not the multitude as a whole.71

Socrates’ equation of rhetoric and dialectic is useful for his purposes, yet it neglects in public speech what is most influential. This is not without merit, for on the one hand, Socrates must not speak of what he cannot, and on the other hand, his very silence should prove insightful about what is missing. Socrates’ insistence on the equation of rhetoric and dialectic brings about the exclusion of what is necessary for public persuasion – for what is necessary to speak to the many. We again glean what this is negatively through example, by noticing those whom Socrates

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70Ibid., 263b3 - 4.
71Ibid., 263b6 - 9.
mentions as being able to speak publicly. This includes a great litany of notable rhetoricians, including Theodorus, Evenus of Paros, Tisias, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, and Polus, all of whom add some subtle refinement to rhetoric so as to make it more beautiful and attractive.  

But in none of these examples does one find a trait that Socrates fails to demonstrate. It is only at the end of the list where we find what was missing through the inclusion of a notable character whose power and ability strikes us as being both exceedingly simply yet terribly profound:

And the Chalcedonian man’s strength appears to me to have gained, by art, mastery of speeches that are dragged on, piteously wailing over old age and poverty; and at the same time the man has become terribly clever in turn at angering the many and again, when they have been angered, at beguiling them by singing incantations, as he said; and he’s the strongest both at slandering and at dispelling slanders from whatever source.

Here, precisely in his exclusion of the most elemental parts of speaking from the art of rhetoric do we find the reason for which Socrates could not write and could not speak to the many. Not Socrates but Thrasymanchus could speak to and persuade the many, and his ability to do this is directly related to his own nature and eros. For reasons that will become clear shortly, Socrates, his way of life, his philosophizing, more importantly, his eros, did not possess the main element required of public persuasion – the ability to be, or at least to act, angry.

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72 Ibid., 266e2 - 267c3.

73 Ibid., 267c6 - 267d3.

74 Cf. Republic, 336b1 - 336d2. Listen also to what Leo Strauss says on this point; “Thrasymachus acts like the city, he resembles the city, and this means according to a way of reasoning acceptable to both Socrates and Thrasymanchus (350c7-8), Thrasymanchus is the city. It is because he is the city that he maintains the thesis of the city regarding justice and that he is angry at Socrates for his implicit antagonism to the thesis of the city... He can play the city
because he has something in common with the city. Being a rhetorician, he resembles the sophist, and the sophist *par excellence* is the city (492aff.; *Gorgias* 465c4-5). Thrasymachus’ rhetoric was especially concerned with both arousing and appeasing the angry passions of the multitude, with both attacking a man’s character and countering such attacks, as well as with play-acting as an ingredient of oratory. When making his appearance in the *Republic*, Thrasymachus plays the angry city. It will become clear later in the *Republic* that anger is no mean part of the city.” Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 78.

75 Are anger and indignation not simply expression of spiritedness or thumos, that part of the soul known best for its willful self-assertion and desire for victory? Not quite, as anger is the result of thwarted anger, and is only the necessary condition of spiritedness. Spiritedness emerges from anger as a noble sense of overcoming, as a desire for victory over that which stands as an obstacle to eros. Thumos has an existence of its own over and above that of eros, but the two are inextricably linked. And because thumos both emerges from and becomes a desire in its own right, it is susceptible to education similar to that of eros. The city then is educable in two intimately related ways: with regard to what it both loves and hates. On this point hear too Leo Strauss; “To these two kinds of needs there correspond two kinds of desires. Desire is directed toward a good, the good simply, but spiritedness, of which anger is the most obvious form, is directed towards a goal as difficult to obtain. Spiritedness arises out of the desire proper being resisted or thwarted. Spiritedness is needed for overcoming the resistance to the satisfaction of the desire. Hence spiritedness is a desire for victory. Whereas eros is primarily the desire to generate human beings, spiritedness is the derivative willingness to kill and to be killed, to destroy human beings.” Leo Strauss, *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 166.

Surely this comes as an almost comic revelation, for what are we saying except that one of the greatest minds in history stands apart from others simply by virtue of his lack of anger.75 Are we not ourselves guilty of a gross over- or underestimation? Yet as ridiculous as this assertion seems, upon closer inspection, we find that it is perfectly in keeping with what we know of the historical Socrates. The *Symposium* taught us that Socrates did not write because he could not in the manner in which Homer and Hesiod did – because he could not write at the
highest level. But this meant that he could not write tragedy, which he himself carefully admits.

by linking Thrasydamus’ ability to that of Sophocles and Euripides:

What if, in turn, someone came before Sophocles and Euripides and said that he knows how to make exceedingly long utterances about a small matter and quite small ones about a great matter, and pitiable ones whenever he wishes, and in turn the opposite, fearful and threatening ones, and whatever other things of that sort, and that in teaching these things he transmits the making of tragedy? 76

Tragedy may include a great many refinements and poetic nuances, but it must somehow transmit threats and fear, both of which are born of anger and indignation. 77 Thrasydamus’ power lies in that which he shares with the great tragedians, but of which Socrates takes no part.

Describing this completes our sketch of the historical Socrates, as well as necessarily giving us a solid context for understanding our hitherto silent author who stands behind all we learned hitherto. 78

76 Phaedrus, 268c7 - 268d3.

77 Listen to the similar way in which Cicero’s Crassus speaks of rhetoric and the rhetorician; “It is the man, moreover, who can walk unharmed even amid the weapons of the enemy, protected not so much by the herald’s staff as by the title of orator, the man who is able, through speech, to expose to the hatred of their fellow citizens the crime and deceit of the guilty, and by punishment to keep them in check, and to free the innocent from the penalties of the law by protecting them with his intellect; and who can also, when the people are languishing or going astray, rouse them to a sense of honor or lead them away from error or fire their rage against the wicked or soothe them when stirred up against the good. He is, in short, the man who is able, through speech, to arouse or calm in people’s hearts any emotion that the circumstances and the case demand.” Cicero, On the Ideal Orator, pp. 106-7. Compare also Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1179b10 - 14.

78 On this point, hear what the great Muslim commentator Farabi says about Socrates and his relationship to Plato; “He (Plato) explained Thrasydamus’ method and made it known that Thrasydamus was more able than Socrates to form the character of the youth and instruct the
Poetry and Anger: The Gods and the City

What has come to light as most distinctive about Socrates is his eros, his unquenchable yearning for learning and wisdom. His was a way of life centered around the unfettered pursuit of the truth, fueled by an almost unimaginable desire to know the nature of the whole. The completion he sought necessitated the legitimacy of his way of life, for the love of wisdom is the pursuit, not the attainment of truth. His way of life comes to represent for us the very symbol of philosophy, for in it we find the perfect example of a man who represents the meaning of philosophy, which is to say, someone who signifies the very essence of the activity itself. Yet because his eros desired the true good in the most literal sense of the phrase, his was an eros without an object, without something that would satiate his yearning or help to provide his completion. Socrates was a man forever maimed, if we may be pardoned an Aristophanic expression, for he could find neither happiness nor home in any conventional sense. Eros without a particular object, without a real manifestation of the beautiful, is an eros that is divorced from the body, and as such, is not one that can find its home amongst other bodies.

Without a good that could be his own forever in an ordinary sense – without a particular object that he could truly call his own – Socrates’ eros could make no claims of possession the multitude; Socrates possessed only the ability to conduct a scientific investigation of justice and the virtues, and a power of love, but did not possess the ability to form the character of the youth and the multitude; and the philosopher, the prince, and the legislator ought to be able to use both methods: the Socratic method with the elect, and Thrasymanchus’ method with the youth and the multitude.” Alfarabi, “The Philosophy of Plato,” Alfarabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, trans. Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 66-67.
way most men do. As we have seen, to love an object, whether that be a person or a place, as one’s own brings with that attachment a sense of right, a feeling that what one so desperately wants to be one’s own forever is justified if not sanctified. Human eros is thus attended to by claims of right, which in turn gives rise to the notion of ownership as the lover wishes that the object of his love be his forever. And with ownership, a word we must risk using, come the traditional institutions that also attend to eros – monogamy, the family, private property, even the city. All the claims of exclusivity that surround human eros develop because they are the resultant expression of a sense of right felt by the lover who wishes his beloved to be his own forever. Justice, then, arises out of a sense of property properly understood, for it is our spirited desire that what we have and what we want might be ours by right, and hence, that our exclusive use of them may be viewed as proper and just.

Socrates’ clash with the city, and thus the true core of his enigmatic civic life, is the result of the necessary conflict between two radically different forms of eros. That most men’s eros expresses itself by claiming particular objects exclusively suggests that the city becomes an aspect of man’s erotic nature because it allows man the opportunity to have access to those objects he desires while at the same time setting limits with regard to the extent of his possessions. The city must do this, for otherwise the longing that the beautiful be one’s own forever would lead to conflict amongst men, as they wish to possess all they can or more than they should. Eros is then the basis of both justice and injustice; it is what gives rise to a need for
propriety and exclusivity while at the same time prompting some to take more than their share. It is also for this reason that the law is both persuasive and coercive, for the promotion of justice, what men should do, comes with the harshness of forbidding men of what they should not. 79

Eros is the locus of both amorous embraces and harsh compulsion because it ultimately is in need of law, and that only because thwarted eros, that jilted feeling which occurs with the pangs of injustice, is the genesis of anger. As odd as the suggestion seems, anger is the kindred brethren of human eros.

Man must be political, then, for his eros must both be fulfilled and constrained, a task possible only at the level of the city. Yet the city itself, with its laws that define right and justice, rests on a larger foundation that gives support to the parameters set for eros. The laws need that there be cosmic support for justice, a hope that the claims made by eros will be recognized not only as right and just, but also that injustice will not go unpunished. The laws thus need the gods, the gods that ultimately punish injustice and enforce the city’s laws concerning eros. The city’s gods are thus born of anger and fear, anger at the erotic transgressions committed by men, and fear that those injustice might be punished by the terrible avenging gods. The avenging gods are man’s highest and most exalted hope that what is his might be acknowledged and protected by those beings capable of divine retribution. Divine retribution is that hope within man’s soul that what is above him shares with him the same indignation at

injustice; “Self-knowledge has as its contrary self-overestimation but not misidentification. Misidentification of this apparently more fundamental kind seems to be the preserve of tragedy, in which jealousy is not human but divine. Divine jealousy is prompted by hubris, and hubris shows itself either in a claim to more than the human or in a belief that there are goods that are one’s own and are not due to the gods.” The city requires its avenging gods, then, because they alone are capable of providing cosmic support to the conventions that circumscribe eros.

It is understandable why Thrasymachus, Sophocles and Euripides could speak to the many, as each in his own way is capable of arousing the fear and anger that surround man’s erotic, and hence, political life. Thrasymachus’ is a power that cleverly plays on men’s notions of justice by focusing on that which might transgress the rights they have to their possessions. Whether it be making men fear what might rob them of their own, or making them angry at those who would attempt to do so, the rhetorician is able to manipulate men by using those emotions tied to civic life. Likewise, the tragedians speak to the many because they too play off of the fears and indignation that attend to man’s political nature. But in many ways they are the more powerful wielders of rhetoric, for they, unlike Thrasymachus, can affect the lives and education of a great many more people than can the public orator. The poets are the teachers of the many, the guides whose tales provide instruction about the wishes of the gods – about that which invokes their divine anger. Men learn about why their city encourages and dissuades certain

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types of actions through witnessing in speech what angers the gods. The poets provide the cosmic support to justice that the city needs by painting images of divine retribution punishing the erotic nature that oversteps its bounds.

With regard to Socrates, then, we have said that he did not write because he was unable to, because he could not at the highest level, which is to say that he could not write tragedy. For it to have been useful to him, Socrates would have had to speak to or write for the many in such as way as to convince them of the salutary effects of his way of life. Yet Socrates could not do this, which compels us to say that he was not capable of speaking to the many or writing because he could not get angry. Socrates wisdom has come to be identified with self-knowledge, with the knowledge of who and what one is, as well as of what one is not. This is not at all a bad picture, for in it we see how the knowledge of ignorance, so unique to Socrates, informs us of Socrates’ deficiencies. Socrates could be a comic figure, could even have written comedies, for the nature of comedy is to poke fun at the ridiculous and nothing is more ridiculous than the over-estimation of oneself. Even the conviction of one’s own ignorance, especially in Socrates’ case, carries with it the presumption of ignorance on the part of others, a presumption that has merit only to the extent that one has a standard against which to judge:

The Socratic knowledge of ignorance, with its sweeping claim that every other kind of wisdom is *doxosophia*, seems to be true *doxosophia*; that is, Socrates has a true opinion about his wisdom. Socrates’ opinion cannot be knowledge if an open-ended inquiry into his ignorance characterizes it. It must surely seem, however, as spurious as any other claim to wisdom. Even if Socrates were to take its measure precisely, he would still be superior to everyone else and seem even more so. In order, however, for Socrates to be shown to overvalue his own wisdom, it is necessary that
Socrates’ greatest strength, the purity of his philosophical eros, was also his greatest weakness, and it took the power of a great comedian to show him and us that the uniqueness of his eros was what left him powerless before the city. Socrates’ quest to know the nature of the whole, and hence himself, not only failed to integrate him into the human whole of which he was a part, but also alienated him from that whole. Socrates was no leader of men; his passion could not be used to persuade the great mass of opinions in the city. Even Aristophanes was in possession of a power that Socrates did not possess.

Socrates’ powerlessness with regard to the city was due to the wisdom he sought as his own good, for his was not an eros that was easily thwarted, if at all. What cannot ultimately be possessed does not allow for the claims of right that attend to most erotic objects. For this reason we have no evidence that Socrates was ever truly angry, an emotion that comes about only when one is kept from what one thinks by right is their own. Without something that can be

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81 Ibid., p. 204

82 Cf. Clouds, 1506 - 1509.

83 Socrates was capable of marshaling the gods in support of philosophy, going so far as to speak of the divine retribution facing men in the afterlife (cf. Republic 615a6 - 616b9). But one would do well to remember the dramatic function of this tale – the education here is of one, or at most a few, young gentlemen, not the city as a whole. In fact, the divine support provided by this tale is as tenuous as is the city in speech it supports, a point that suggests the role of the characters to whom the tale is directed. Cf. Apology, 35e1 - 36a2.
possessed, there can be no sense of injustice the result of which is indignation. But because anger, being the face of thwarted eros, is a very great power if used correctly, it can function as a means of protecting oneself and one’s own. Socrates could speak to Phaedrus as a way of protecting himself from the city because the gentleman as such is open to the claims of philosophy. To the degree to which he was successful at this, Socrates could count his erotic rhetoric as a means of protection from the city that could not understand him and whose laws could not account for his eros. To speak to the many, though, requires the experience or feigning of anger as a means of persuasion; hence, to speak to the many Socrates would have had to be or pretend to be angry so as to convince them of the true justice concerning his way of life. Protecting himself from the city would have required manipulating in speech or writing anger and fear, which ultimately would have required of him that he educate the many with regard to support given by the gods, not to the justice of the city, but to the divine claims of philosophy. Thus, Socrates would have to make the case for philosophy within the context of tales about the city’s gods while also giving to those gods what they need most from the perspective of the city – the anger that accompanies divine retribution. Yet to do so would require that he reconcile what he knew to be the truth concerning philosophy with what he understood to underlie necessarily every notion of human eros and justice, a task he was apparently never able to accomplish.  

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84 David Bolotin illustrates this point nicely when he discusses Socrates’ critique of Homer in the Republic; “Now what this doctrine (that the god or the gods neither change their form nor deceive anyone in speech or in deed) implies, among other things, is that the gods do not rule over men. For ruling requires the use of punishment, but a god who causes no evils at all
would not even harm bad men by punishing them for their misdeeds. It is true that Socrates
allows the poets to say that the gods do punish, as long as the punishment is said to benefit
those who undergo it. But later, in the course of his argument that the gods never lie, he indicates
that they have no concern to benefit anyone foolish enough to need the benefit, if it is one, of
being punished. Socrates’ initial allowance, then, of stories that the gods punish must be taken
with a grain of salt. And accordingly, when he claims that these new stories about the gods must
replace the Homeric ones so that the future guardians will come to revere the gods and become
godlike, the ‘reverence’ that he has in mind contains no element of the fear of punishment. The
fear of divine punishment, which accompanies the traditional posture of obedience to the gods as
rulers, is to be wholly superseded by the wish to imitate them.” David Bolotin, “The Critique of
Homer in the Republic,” Political Philosophy and the Human Soul: Essays in Memory of Allan

Conclusion

The historical Socrates, the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues, and the Socrates as the
eternal symbol of philosophy all have a grounding in the same man if we understand properly
what philosophical eros means as well as what sorts of demands it makes. Socrates the man is
one and the same as the philosophical way of life par excellence. His was an existence dedicated
to his own yearnings and devoted to attending his own soul. To suggest this, with the addition of
his oft repeated insistence on knowing himself, implies that Socrates was, in a way, the object of
his own eros. His insistence on the self-knowledge that accompanies the unending questioning
about the good, the noble and the just is the only means by which the activity of Socratic
philosophy comes together with its object - the questioning being himself. It is understandable
that we say of Socrates’ eros that it was abstracted from the body, for it could not have been
The distance required to stand above oneself so as to know oneself is great indeed, 
great enough to require an abstraction of almost unintelligible proportions. Yet Socrates was 
apparently capable of such heights, and it is for this reason that he has become the eternal 
symbol of philosophy.

In his prominence, however, we find weakness, the reason for which we write this 
investigation when he himself wrote none at all. Because his was an eros wholly pure - free from 
any desires of the body - he also was weak with regard to the body. Socrates could not speak 
and write at the highest level because he did not feel the stirrings of anger and indignation. To 
persuade the many would have required him to speak angry half-truths in the name of the gods, 
to speak about retribution and coercion. Such was not within Socrates` power, even to the extent 
to which he was inclined or forced to try. Socrates was too prudent, too concerned with his own 
desires to be capable of speaking to those who would not listen. Yet his prudence is also his 
imprudence, for his lack of power with regard to the city is that which ultimately undermines his 
very way of life.

85 Jacob Howland makes an interesting observation about his point in a different but 
nevertheless useful context: “Socrates’ eros is not tragic, partly because it is well informed on the 
most crucial point: his intercourse with Alcibiades has confirmed his intuitions about the 
conditions under which the desire to become a god destroys itself. In part, too, Socrates seems to 
stand apart from his own life and observe it as an experiment, in much the same way Homer’s 
gods regarded the great war at Troy as an interesting spectacle. Socrates’ peculiar self-
detachment is suggested by his statement that ‘I would gladly see myself accepting’ gifts from 
Alcibiades (151b5) – a phrase which more than one commentator had labelled [sic] ‘unplatonic’ 
in style.” Jacob Howland, “Socrates and Alcibiades: Eros, Piety, and Politics,” Interpretation, 
Vol. 18, No. 1 (Fall, 1990), p. 86.
Here, in all its complexity, we have the tale of Socrates, the man who was both the most and least prudent of any man to have ever lived. In one sense, he was certainly the greatest of citizens, for no man has ever taken up the question of virtue more vigorously than Socrates. But in another sense, in the sense that counts most for political life, Socrates was no citizen at all. He can not be a model for citizenship because his philosophizing – his eros – is idiosyncratic. A community of Socrates’s would be no community at all; a city may be the necessary condition for Socratic philosophy, but only one who has transformed philosophy into a doctrine or dogma could think that philosophy could be made the sufficient condition of a city. Thus, for reasons that are now clear, we must deny to political theory the use of Socrates as a model for citizenship, both in an historical and literary sense.

In so far as we have found the historical Socrates, however, we have also found another, one who has stood above us all along. Our author has shown us the way to Socrates, but in such as way as to also show us himself. If our endeavor is to be more than mere historiography, the emergence of Plato as author must be significant with regard to the question of philosophy’s political nature. Is it not Plato who, through his very presentation of Socrates, himself becomes the model of citizenship? We cannot answer this yet, but we know now where we must turn. Our attention must shift to Plato, not in the hopes of recreating an historical image of him, but of seeing how his writing corrects for Socrates’ deficiencies. We must learn, if only in a basic and
preliminary way, how a philosopher can possess in the right proportions the eros and spiritedness that allow philosophy to enter into civic life.
Chapter 7: Platonic Statesmanship – The Laws as Ministerial Drama

As I looked now to the speeches we’ve been going through since dawn until the present – and it appears to me that we have not been speaking without some inspiration from gods – they seemed to me to have been spoken in a way that resembles in every respect a kind of poetry. It’s probably not surprising for me to have had such a feeling, to have been very pleased at the sight of my own speeches, brought together, as it were; for compared to most of the speeches that I have learned or heard, in poems, or poured out in prose like what’s been said, these appeared to me to be both the most well-measured, at any rate, of all, and especially appropriated for the young to hear.

*Laws*, 811c5 - 811d7

At this stage of our examination, we are faced with an uncomfortable dilemma. If we are to maintain, as we have hitherto, that Plato’s superiority over his teacher is to be found in the fact that he was political, i.e., that he wrote, we must admit this superiority, from the perspective of philosophy, may be in fact a failing or imperfection. The protection of philosophy from the city is a noble endeavor in its own right, as it recognizes the priority of the philosophical way of life over the other competing claims made by men. Yet protecting the pursuit of knowledge is not essential to the pursuit as such; truly philosophical eros is that which is drawn wholly and in an unadulterated way toward truth – toward the good that can be one’s own forever. Socrates is the eternal symbol of philosophy because he alone manifested the pure philosophical eros; Socrates alone of all men possessed the *daimon*. We are compelled to say that no matter how prudent his intentions were in attempting to make philosophy and politics amiable, Plato’s own philosophical eros nonetheless falls far short of Socrates’. In the end, Plato and Aristophanes occupy the same status, both are authors whose works point
beyond themselves, toward the purely self-regarding and paradigmatic philosophizing of Socrates.

Unless, of course, there is another story. We benefitted before from listening to a dialogue between a comic and a philosopher, and here we hope to benefit again from another dialogue, only this time it will be between two thinkers. For we cannot assume that Socrates’ argument, given what we know of his eros and his resultant literary silence, is simply superior to whatever Plato accomplished with his written legacy. Obviously Plato did not believe Socrates’ way of life and philosophizing to be simply superior to his own, otherwise his writing would be mere testimonial, a supposition hardly to be endured.¹ No, what we have in our possession in terms of extant writings serves as evidence that Plato himself disagreed as to the true character of philosophical eros. Platonic poetry replaces Aristophanic comedy as the true adversary to Socratic philosophizing.

Yet maybe adversary is too harsh a word, for was Aristophanes really Socrates’ enemy? Instead we must hold that the Platonic corpus serves as a corrective, an essential addition if you will, to the symbolic and historical Socrates. But in what way, as the standard of philosophical

¹“While Platonic love of wisdom presents itself as nothing but the imitation of Socratic love of wisdom, the very act of imitation indicates the essential separation between them. Insofar as Socrates is indeed represented as the paradigm of the philosophic enterprise, an exploration of the connection between his love of wisdom and his avoidance of the activity of writing would be the necessary basis for any Platonic defense of the possibility of a philosophic art of writing.” Ronna Burger, Plato’s Phaedrus: A Defense of a Philosphic Art of Writing (University, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 2.
purity set by Socrates serves as the locus of the argument against writing? In honor of Plato, and yet in deference to Socrates, we are compelled to say that writing at the highest level – what might be more broadly called the kingly art – must be an essential part of philosophy and not merely an accidental phenomenon, no matter how prudent. In light of Socrates and his erotic philosophizing, we must say that Plato’s response is to require of philosophy that it have an aspect of statesmanship, or put another way, that true philosophizing must be political philosophy:

For Plato, knowledge proper or striving for knowledge proper is philosophy. Philosophy is striving for knowledge of the whole, for contemplation of the whole. The whole consists of parts; knowledge of the whole is knowledge of all parts of the whole as parts of the whole. Philosophy is the highest activity, and man is an excellent, perhaps the most excellent, part of the whole. The whole is not a whole without man, without man’s being whole or complete. But man becomes whole not without his own effort, and this effort presupposes knowledge of a particular kind: knowledge which is not contemplative or theoretical but prescriptive or commanding or practical.²

Socrates and his apolitical, un-bodily eros stand apart from writing and statesmanship, and because of this he is, nay must be, absent from the longest and latest of the dialogues – the one that deals with the founding of a city. It is fitting, then, that our examination has pointed toward the Laws, for in it we see that aspect of statesmanship which is a part of philosophy but which was not open to Socrates.

Plato’s writings must be not only poetry, but complete poetry – that sort of poetry which educates completely. In contradistinction to what might be called Socratic poetry, Platonic poetry must be able to tell half-truths, and hence half-untruths, completely, i.e., in the

name of both philosophy and politics. On the one hand, it must do what Socratic dialectics can do; it must educate and show young men who yearn to know what must be known – it must grasp immortality through the cultivation of young minds. It can do this both immediately and at a distance; Platonic poetry can teach young philosophers or gentleman what they need to know through a simple exchange of discourse, one modeled on that of his teacher. One need only read to be shown what Socrates would have shown in person, to be involved in the dialectic for which Socrates was so well known. The drama itself is life-giving; it allows for the continuation of philosophy in the souls of the living through the words of those long dead. In this way, the dialogues succeed through time in doing what for Socrates was limited to space.3

On the other hand, the dialogues must do what Socrates could not – they must speak to and educate the many. As we have said, this is not simply for the sake of philosophy, but instead for the sake of the many themselves. In his writings Plato must be both philosopher and king, educator and shepherd, all in an attempt to lead the many toward the best, most just life possible. That this is the case is reflected in the responsibility the philosopher has to the city, not simply because it is an object of curiosity, although it is that, but because he himself is part of that mode of being which in its very completeness gives the philosopher access to the whole:

3“While the apparent moderation of Socrates’ refraining from writing is revealed to be the hubris of a divine perspective that ignores the need for human art, the Platonic defense of a philosophic art of writing that appears to betray the hubris of a desire for immortality is revealed to be the true moderation of reliance on human art as the necessary path for man, who is not god.” Burger, Plato’s Phaedrus: A Defense of a Philosophic Art of Writing, p. 6.
The kingly art is one of the arts directly concerned with making men whole or entire. The most obvious indication of every human being’s incompleteness and at the same time of the manner in which it can be completed is the distinction of the human race into the two sexes: just as the union of men and women, the primary goal of eros, makes “man” self-sufficient for the perpetuity, not to say sempiternity, of the human species, all other kinds of incompleteness to be found in men are completed in the species, in the “idea,” of man.

The education of the many, the kingly art, is also the concern of the philosopher, and Plato’s writings must in some measure make clear how this is accomplished. As was alluded to before, this is done through the act of statesmanship, which is the giving of laws. The giving of laws recognizes the role eros plays in human life, but more importantly, it educates eros, instructing as to what is and is not proper. The law takes human eros for granted, not seeking to efface eros, but instead acknowledging its role within the whole and seeking to moderate it, to make it more just.

The Laws in particular completes Plato’s poetic corpus because it alone demonstrates in the most vibrant way possible how philosophy and statesmanship can and must go together. The Laws is a dialogue like any other, i.e., it is a drama, but it is also something very different. The action of the drama is an act of founding a regime, where a profoundly political deed is shown in speech. As an aspect of philosophy, the Laws is the occasion where thought and practice are brought together on the plain of thinking – a chance congruence of theoretical and practical wisdom come together. Because statesmanship is an element of Platonic

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4 Leo Strauss, “Plato,” History of Political Philosophy, p. 77.

philosophizing, though, the occasion of speech and deed does not abstract from deed; the *Laws* will give its due to the necessities of the regime precisely because it means to instruct the regime.

To take this a step further, the *Laws* is itself an act of statesmanship on the part of the author, not simply a guide for would-be statesmen. That Plato authored the *Laws* suggests his intentions to usher in a new way of thinking about both politics and philosophy. The responsibility of authorship in this case points to Plato the historical man as engaged in a new founding, a revolutionary-politic if you will. It is an attempt to found a new mode of practice, to give a new precedent to action informed by thought. Regardless of the consequences of this act, a point susceptible to much disputation, Plato’s decision to recreate in speech the act of founding signifies the attempt on his part to educate philosopher and statesman alike, itself a deed meant to provide a new standard for politics regardless of time or space:

The *Phaedrus* culminates in a discussion of writing because writing appears indispensable if an enterprise is to pursue a determined course over many generations. Thus Plato sketches the possibility of a prolonged rhetorical project conducted by philosophy for its own benefit as well as for that of political society.6

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6James H. Nichols, “Introduction,” *Phaedrus*, trans. James H. Nichols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 24. Consider also these words of Thomas West: “We may conclude that Plato’s defense of Socrates succeeds in rescuing philosophy from the poet’s condemnation. Although his defense partly concedes the validity of Aristophanes’ charges, it goes on to show that there is no necessary conflict between the philosophic life on the one hand, and knowledge of the human soul and public responsibility on the other. Characteristic of Plato’s teaching in this respect is his turning away from Socrates’ city of virtue whose public hero is the philosopher (this is Socrates’ ironic proposal in the *Apology of Socrates*, elaborated in the *Republic*). Instead, Plato put forward in his *Laws* a regime in which authority was to be shared, under the rule of law, by moneyed men (oligarchs) and commoners (democrats). In such a regime philosophers could live and teach, and the public opinion of that regime could be formed by philosophic-poetic writings, like those of Plato himself, addressed to a wide audience.” Thomas
The very existence of the *Laws* attests to the essential role statesmanship plays within the activity of philosophy, as well as the attempt of its author to shepherd both future philosopher and citizen alike. Plato is a true founder, one who brings about new modes and orders, because he is the first to bring about the possibility and responsibility for reconciling philosophy and politics. Plato is thus fully founder, legislator, philosopher and myth-maker. How he accomplishes this through writing we must labor to see.

**Overcoming the Pitfalls of the Written Word**

It is interesting that legislating is what separates Plato from Socrates, for is it not Plato’s own Socrates who warns us of the dangers associated with writing? Plato’s deference for his master’s way of life is testified to by the precision with which he crafts written arguments against writing, arguments he puts in Socrates’ mouth. To write at the highest level, to write what might be called philosophical tragedy, requires of the philosopher that he truly understand what the city requires. To lay down the fundamental laws for a political regime is to give shape to the regime, an act that is informed by some notion of the city’s good. The legislator’s laws, and with these his tragic half-truths, are intended for those who cannot understand at the highest level – for those whose eros clings to particulars instead of ideas. Yet, this philosophical statesmanship also requires understanding the ways in which writing, by the very fact of its external and independent existence from the author, can be misunderstood if not misused. It is

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for this reason that Socrates had to be the author of the critique of writing, for only he who could
not author half-truths in the name of human eros is capable of providing the greatest critique
possible. But it is also for this reason that his critique had to come to us within a written record.

As noted before, the last part of the *Phaedrus*’ is dedicated to a critique of writing. It is
instructive that this critique is set within a dialogue whose explicit theme is rhetoric, and whose
implicit one is eros. The entire dialogue is a magnificent example of Socrates’ rhetoric in action,
and it comes as no surprise that his harshness with regard to writing arises out of a confrontation
with law-givers and poets. If we may be pardoned an instance of brevity for the sake of
illustration, we can say that Socrates’ criticisms of writing can be reduced to two. Following
immediately after he raised the tension between the probable and the true with regard to proper
speech, Socrates tells Phaedrus of an Egyptian myth that describes the coming into being of the
written word. The demon Theuth was one of man’s original benefactors, discovering for him a
great number of arts of which writing was one. Taking these arts to Thamos, the highest god,
Theuth asked that they be given to man for his benefit.

Thamos, however, has reservations about the benefit man will receive from writing, and in
these reservations we find Socrates’ first critique. According to Theuth, “This knowledge, king, .
. . will make the Egyptians wiser and provide them with better memory; for it has been found as
a drug for memory and wisdom.”7 But Thamos disagrees, replying to Theuth, “for this will

provide forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it, through neglect of memory, seeing
that, through trust in writing, they recollect from outside with alien markings, not reminding
themselves from inside, by themselves." All writing serves as a drug, but not a necessarily
beneficial one. With this Egyptian myth Socrates suggests that writing does the opposite of
what it is intended to do, which is to benefit the memory. Instead of an aid, it is in fact a crutch,
a mere pretense of learning instead of the brutal self-reflection and inquiry demanded of thinking.
Thus Thamos says to Theuth, “You are supplying the opinion of wisdom to the students, not
truth. For you’ll see that, having become hearers of much without teaching, they will seem to be
sensible judges in much, while being for the most part senseless, and hard to be with, since
they’ve become wise in their own opinion instead of wise.”

If writing does not promote wisdom, if instead it promotes the pretense of wisdom which
in truth makes the acquisition of wisdom all the more difficult, the use of writing is indeed
curious. Yet Socrates is not finished, as the first criticism of writing is followed immediately by a
second, possibly more profound shortcoming. The enterprise of writing itself is an illusion, one
intent on making the reader think they have encountered something possessing wisdom, but
which lacks what is necessary for true learning. In speaking of the written word, Socrates tells
Phaedrus:

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8Ibid., 275a2 - 6.

9Ibid., 275a7 - 275b3.
For you would think that they speak with some understanding, but if you ask something about the things said, wishing to learn, it indicates some one thing only, and always the same. And when it’s been once written, every speech rolls around everywhere, alike by those who understand as in the same way by those for whom it is in no way fitting, and it does not know to whom it ought to speak and to whom not. And when it suffers offense and is reviled without justice it always needs its father’s assistance. For by itself it cannot defend or assist itself.\(^\text{10}\)

The very thing itself – the written word – is wooden, it can say only one thing, and say it the same way. If wisdom is sought, and the path to wisdom is inquiry if not dialectics, then writing can be of no use, as it cannot be questioned or expected to give different answers. The written word is thus soulless, without life or knowledge the possession of which is essential to acquiring wisdom.

Socrates’ two criticisms sound as a clarion call to those who might mistake the transmission of thought through writing with the education of the soul. Writing simply cannot do what dialectics does; the written word cannot be alive in the way the spoken word is, adapting and changing to suit the listener while remaining true to the wisdom found within. But because we hear such a powerful critique not from the real mouth of Socrates but from his dramatic counterpart, we know that these criticisms are meant to pave the way toward what will be the true form of writing. Plato’s dialogical dramas must do what Socrates says writing cannot do, what Socrates himself could not do, and they must do it in such a way as to perfect the art of writing.

\(^{10}\)Ibid., 275d8 - 275e5.
Given that the Platonic dialogue must be able to speak to the many and few alike, the drama of the dialogue must possess at least two levels on any occasion. That which requires the least effort, which commands or compels, must be the first layer at which the access to Plato’s practical political teachings are had directly. Conversely, that which requires the most effort, which alludes or even contradicts, must exist underneath for those who would look to the dialogue as an aid in the process of self-knowledge. But if the lower level, the more subtle of Plato’s teaching, is to be “alive,” that is to say, if it is to escape the problem of becoming wooden with regard to speeches, it must differ at times from the higher level of the dialogue, a dialectic within the text that “en-souls” it – which allows it to speak and to answer. The dialogue must be like a man, it must have both an outward and inward face much as a man has a body and soul. Both must exist together within a whole, but each must also have a life of its own, one that is supported and detracted from by the other part, as well as by the other dialogues within the corpus.

On the deeper, more subtle level, the dialogue must mimic the speech and manner of Socratic dialectic, reflecting as it does Socrates’ speech and manner. Because of this, the Phaedrus ends with Socrates telling Phaedrus what is necessary for writing well; Socrates alone is the master of the conversational art that has as its object self-knowledge. But it is also the reason he cannot be present in the Laws; Socrates can speak of what he is capable, but not of what he is
not. His remarks on proper writing serve as the basis for at least one-half of what will be the Platonic art of writing.

Impasse to Resolution: Making the Silent Socrates Speak

According to Socrates, writing beautifully requires at least three things if the written word is to be as open and adaptable as is human speech. A well written verse is, “the one that is written with knowledge in the soul of him who understands, with power to defend itself, and knowing to speak and to keep silence toward those it ought.” A true author is he who knows, who can write verse that speaks as well as answers, and also who knows his audience, i.e., can speak differently to different souls. With Socrates’ emendations, we may infer that he was aware of the elements that go into what will become the Platonic dialogue, but was nonetheless incapable of authoring one. Be that as it may, he gives us in particular what we need to understand at least one half of every dialogue. The knowledge of the author is the “... sciences of just and beautiful and good things ...”, while the ability of the verse both to speak and answer is the product of play and seriousness equally, with the character of the playful being like a gardener:

But he will sow the gardens in writings, as is likely, and write, when he writes, for the sake of play, storing a treasure of reminders for himself, when he comes into an old age of forgetfulness; and for everyone who is going after the same track, he’ll be pleased to see the gardens naturally grow up tender. But when others engage in other kinds of play, watering themselves with

\(^ {11}\text{Ibid., 276a6 - 8.}\)
drinking parties and other things that are brothers to these, then that man, as is likely, will pass his time playing with the things I’m speaking of instead of these.  

Conversely, the nature of the serious is more akin to that of a physician:

But much more beautiful, I think, is the seriousness that comes into being about these things, when someone using the dialectical art, taking hold of a fitting soul, plants and sows with knowledge speeches that are competent to assist themselves and him who planted and are not barren but have seed, whence other speeches, naturally growing in other characters, are competent to pass this on, ever deathless, and make him who has it experience as much happiness as is possible for a human being. 

The divine Plato’s immortal art places him alongside those authors to whom the greatest education was attributed – Homer and Hesiod – because within that art is not only wisdom, but the seeds of perpetuity that implant themselves within men’s souls. The nexus of the playful and serious, that intersection out of which both comedy and tragedy spring forth, is a mirror of the soul, and the greatest of the poets is he who, in understanding not only this nexus, but also how the soul stands above it while appropriating it, can educate men properly.

It is for these reasons that the last criterion for beautiful writing be that of depth – that a work speak what it must to whom it must when it must. It has to embrace all readers alike, give to each what he enjoys yet also attempting to teach those preferences – to mold the erotic preferences of a great many souls. Hence Socrates says of the equally silent and garrulous prose:

. . . and, seeing clearly concerning the soul’s nature in accordance with these same things, discovering the form that fits together with each nature, in this way sets down and orders the

12Ibid., 276c3 - 4; 276d1 - 9.

13Ibid., 276e4 - 277a5. The serious is thus the result of eros’ attendant fertility, its grasping for immortality. To the degree to which Plato’s ability to write is more ‘fertile’ than Socrates’ dialectic, however, Plato was also the happier of the two.
speech, giving speeches of many colors and embracing all harmonic modes to a many-colored soul and simple ones to a simple soul—before this he will not be able to handle with art the class of speeches, to the extent that it naturally admits of it, either for teaching something or for persuading something, as the whole earlier argument had disclosed to us.14

The soul is both one and many; all need poetry while each needs it in their own way. The dialogue must be a mirror to the soul; it must allow each soul to see itself from within the dialogue, not in its unadulterated form, but with the soul become young and noble. Platonic poetry is that mode of expression which mimics the subtlety and flexibility of human speech while providing a setting for the sublime. It is the truly sublime, though, the one that perfects speech and deed each in their turn and in relation to one another. We have then the essence of the Platonic dialogue, at least the essence whose soul gives Socrates his due.

Yet Plato’s corpus is education proper—ministerial if you will—such that it adds to its Socratic education a new form of tragedy, one that ennobles human action in the name of the good. It is no coincidence that Socrates is the main interlocutor for the majority of Plato’s dialogues. This is as it should be, for the Platonic project is one that has come to light as a new form of tragedy, where a new hero is depicted in a noble struggle brought about by an irreconcilable tension. Socrates’ way of life is given a new gloss—one where he becomes the new Odysseus, engaged in a struggle whose ends are just but whose outcome is unjust.15 Plato takes

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14Ibid., 277b9 - 277c7.

15The key to this new tragedy is that only Plato’s Socrates succeeds, i.e., he does in fact become a new sort of hero. The irony in this, of course, is that the historical Socrates had to fail first, thereby paving the way for the literary successor.
his mentor and recasts him in a new light such that the historical dimensions are still there, but
the character nevertheless takes on a new, more profoundly noble stance. It is no surprise that
many readers have great sympathy for Socrates’ plight; if it were not for the fact that we, in our
own investigation, began with Aristophanes’ view, we too would have been enchanted by the
charm Socrates exhibits. The ambiguity that exists between the surface and depth of the text is
developed in an effort to change subtly the common opinion concerning philosophy and
philosopher alike. The wise man becomes the good and just man, all in an effort to educate men
anew with regard to the truly good, noble and just. This duality of character preserves the
Socratic education while effecting a more sweeping change in education proper – now the many
who are not philosophical may also, in some limited way, share in the nobility of philosophy
while retaining a more conventional, albeit now informed, sense of justice.

To complete this circle, to finish this most massive of undertakings, however, is also to go
a step further. Plato’s genius must lie in the fact that he as a philosophical author can educate the
many specifically – he must be able to speak to all in the way Homer and Hesiod could. It is not
sufficient, then, that Plato author a great number of dialogues all of which deal with elements of
the Socratic education. He must also show how the many are to be educated, how that which
directs most men’s lives – the law – must be fashioned. Plato’s achievement over and above his
mentor must be in his literary legislation, an endeavor that will educate through time and space.
We turn now to the *Laws* in order to see what is necessary for the art of politics if a reconciliation is to be had between the good and the love of one’s own.

**Setting the Stage: An Introduction to the *Laws***

What follows is not meant to be an exhaustive commentary on the *Laws*. Instead, it is meant as a prolegomena to any exhaustive study of the *Laws*. The content of the dialogue is an often debated subject, but its character rarely receives its due. Maybe this is as is should be, for the content of the dialogue is precisely what Plato the author wants one to focus on first. The content is, to use our interpretive language, the surface of the dialogue, and the surface of the *Laws* is what makes it distinctive. Given what our investigation has learned thus far, the literary and dramatic structures of the *Laws* were fashioned exactly as they had to be, reflecting the nuances required of beautiful writing. Our prolegomena will develop what we have learned of Plato’s literary art by attempting to show how the general character of the *Laws* corresponds with what is necessary for ministerial poetry, i.e., that poetry which speaks to all souls. We begin our overview, then, by noting first the dramatic setting, and then moving to three general themes to which the *Laws* is addressed.

The first thing that one notices about the *Laws* is its length, unquestionably the longest of the Platonic corpus. But whereas its closest relative in length, the *Republic*, is a narrated dialogue, the *Laws* is instead a performed one, one where there is no intermediary between the reader and the drama’s action. This seems to be the character of works with a more public...
16 The identity of the Athenian Stranger is obviously a matter of considerable debate. Generally scholarship divides into two camps, with the first suggesting that the Athenian Stranger is either the same as, or similar enough to, the historical Plato so as to make the words of the former indicative of the latter’s thoughts. Thus we hear someone such as A. E. Taylor say that “. . . his (the Stranger’s) intellectual qualifications are those of a member of the Academy, and his personal experiences are modelled [sic] on Plato’s own, and to that extent we may fairly take him as standing for Plato, though we have no reason to suppose that he is drawn with any deliberate intention of self-portraiture.” A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1958), p. 465. Consider also Eric Voegelin, who says, “The choice of the interlocutors expressed the historical structure of the Greek political culture. The nameless Athenian, Plato himself speaking, personified the youngest area of Greece that had grown into its intellectual and spiritual center . . .” Eric Voegelin, “Plato and Aristotle,” *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 16 (Columbia: The University of Missouri Press, 2000), p. 43. Conversely, there are those who assert the equivalence of Socrates and the Stranger, such as Aristotle (*Politics* nature, as we have seen with both the *Clouds* and the *Apology*. The audience of the drama, the reader, is invited into the dialogue’s action as if he too were one of the participants, not separated from it by a narrator as if being told a tale. Socrates narrates to someone, presumably the reader, a story of a chance encounter he had with several youths in the *Republic*, while the reader of the *Laws* walks vicariously beside the three old men who make the pilgrimage to the temple of Zeus. Its length and performed character establish perfectly the dynamics necessary for the *Laws’* substance; because the *Laws* is about both law and law-giving, its presentation must account for the nature of law as well as the establishment of a legal code.

The second thing one notices about the dialogue’s structure is the uniqueness of its characters. As we have noted before, Socrates is wholly absent from the dialogue. If one does not commit an injustice by saying so, in his place we find a nameless stranger from Athens, someone about whom we know little.16 The Stranger reminds one at first of the principal

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interlocutors in other Platonic dialogues, so much so in fact that we are tempted to think too much of his being from Athens. Yet he is different in important respects; he is not, as we might suspect, primarily interested in the same sorts of things as is Socrates. The Stranger is characteristically uninterested in what might be called the Socratic questions, the “What is” questions. His questions are more pragmatic in nature; instead of beginning by asking “What is a law,” the Stranger begins the dialogue by asking “Is it a god or some human being, strangers, who is given the credit for laying down your laws?” This is not to say, of course, that this dialogue

1265a12), or Thomas Pangle, who suggests that “The Apology thus proves to reveal with some precision the basis for the dichotomy within Plato’s dialogues, between the Socratic and the non-Socratic. In the Laws we learn what Socrates would have said and done if his quest for self-knowledge, and his friendships, had ever allowed him the leisure to engage in giving advice to political reformers – and if he had ever found himself in the appropriate circumstances.” Thomas Pangle, “Interpretive Essay,” Laws, trans. Thomas Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.379. Our position, which can not be reduced to either of these approaches, is similar to that of Friedlander’s, who says, “It is not surprising that this Athenian does not have a name, even as the characters in Goethe’s Naturliche Tochter are nameless. The reason for not introducing Socrates is by no means the distance from Athens, but rather the distance from what Socrates represents to Plato. That Athens is distant, however, and that Socrates is absent have the same symbolic meaning. To put himself into the dialogue would have gone against Plato’s deepest conviction. It would also have been quite false, for there are moments in the dialogue when Plato’s Athenian descends to the level of the ‘all-too-fond-of-divinations’ (philmanteutas, VII 813D) and yields to popular beliefs to the point of recognizing ghostly voices and demons attached to specific localities. Moreover, Plato’s highest ideal does not come into the dialogue at all, for he still clings to the ideal state founded by Socrates as the best (Laws V 739A et seq., VII 807B). The state in the Laws is the ‘second-best,’ even though as a second (e mia deuteros, 739E 4), it is unique as is the first. In Plato the Socratic power is closer to the core of his own being than the Solonic power, also a part of him; yet the Athenian legislating here has much less of Socrates than of Solon.” Paul Friedlander, Plato, Vol. 3 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 389.

17Laws, 624a1 - 2.
is of a decidedly inferior nature because of the way it begins. For while it is true that the Laws is un-Socratic if not sub-Socratic, that does not mean that its drama is without wisdom.\textsuperscript{18} It means instead that wisdom is brought to bear on practice, which is to say, that the Laws is written primarily though not exclusively for the purpose of reforming, however gently and moderately, statesmanship. Yet for this to be the case, and if the depth of the Laws is not to be outstripped by its breath, then that very wisdom which informs the action must also be found within the action. The nameless Stranger stands as the gateway between philosophy and politics.

More to the political point, as one scholar has recently noted;

Kleinias certainly does not appear to know the stranger and indeed never learns his name in this conversation. (Kleinias deduces the stranger’s nationality by his accent, since Kleinias calls him “Athenian stranger” only after several minutes of talking; see 626d3 and Megillus’ reference to the Athenian’s dialect at 642c5). In contrast, though Kleinias never says his own name, never mentions where he is going, and only hints at his own nationality at the beginning of the conversation (by the references to Zeus at 624a4 and to “We Cretans” at 625a1), the Athenian, with no further information offered, calls him “Kleinias the Knossian” (629c3) and knows, without being told, that Kleinias is on his way to the cave and temple of Zeus (625b1-2). Perhaps he deduced Kleinias’ nationality by Kleinias’ own accent, or simply by the fact that they are walking on the outskirts of Knossos (see 625b1); maybe he know Kleinias’ destination by the road they are traversing (though this inference would seem quite a leap). But where did this visitor from Athens get Kleinias’ name? Not from thin air. In short, the stranger knew who Kleinias is, where he is from, and where he is going before he, the stranger, decided to interrupt Kleinias’ sojourn.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} The What is . . . ? question had not been raised with the same explicitness regarding the virtues at whose promotion education is directed. And even the question, What is education? is not, strictly speaking, discussed, i.e., discussed through questioning of the interlocutors, but the Athenian answers the question which he had raised: he teaches. The level of the discussion is sub-Socratic.” Leo Strauss, \textit{The Argument and The Actions of Plato’s Laws}. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 17.

The action of the *Laws* is intentional, by which is meant that its drama is purposely contrived. That the Stranger initiates the discussion on law-giving suggests the drama of the *Laws* is indeed intent upon speaking to public matters. And because the Stranger chooses as his interlocutor a man who will soon embark upon the task of founding, one cannot help but think that Plato has in mind here precisely what we have hitherto maintained: that the decision to write is one and the same as the art of statesmanship. Even though the coincidences that go into this chance encounter may be great indeed, it seems nevertheless true that wisdom should be able to inform politics to the benefit of both.

One final things must be said about the *Laws*’ setting. Opposite the Stranger are two older men, one of whom we have already mentioned. Who these men are is important to the drama and narrative of the *Laws*. Kleinias the Cretan and Megillus the Spartan stand out not only because of their particular political ancestries, but also because of their likeness to one another, and hence, their respective difference from the Stranger. The Cretan and the Spartan are kindred spirits in so far as the laws that govern Sparta have their origins in those that rule over Crete – the origins of both are handed down by Zeus to Minos.20 Kleinias and Megillus are pious men;
they believe in one way or another that their laws come from, if not have divine sanctions from, the gods. To discuss law-giving is somewhat of a task, for it involves making them aware of and open to the questions involved in proper law-giving. The Stranger has to jump through many hurdles, so to speak, before these men will be ready to discuss things openly and honestly, apart from the traditions that have informed their decisions hitherto.

The city in speech and deed that is to be founded during this day long walk will be one that has a divine precursor; the Stranger in his new and novel Athenian way will have to work with what is present if he is to effect a change in the laws that will govern their nascent city. This dynamic reflects the recognition on the part of philosophy that the political sphere has its own integrity; no new city is wholly new in so far as every founding, every act of legislating, deals with a group of people whose opinions about the good, noble and just are already formed.\(^{21}\) The task, then, will be for the Stranger to use the beliefs of his interlocutors in such a way that they are preserved while being shown to support the truly good, noble and just. The importance of this task should not be understated, nor should the difficulties that surround it:

First, this belief (in the traditional gods) establishes a certain hierarchy, in time and in authority, of political things. In the beginning is the god. From the god proceeds the law. And this law then sets in order a community. The god and the law precede the community. Before there was Knossos there was Zeus and his law. Also, before there was Kleinias, a citizen of Knossos, there was Zeus and his law. The law and the god precede every member of the community, in so far as he is a member of this community. . . Second, Kleinias’ belief teaches that the city is not master of its own destiny. Knossos or Sparta did not make themselves. These cities came from gods, from powers far above themselves. And these powers may limit the cities through the laws and

\(^{21}\)Cf. *Laws*, 708a3 - 708d5.
directions the gods bestow upon them. Finally, his belief implies that similar restrictions rest upon the citizens of any such political community. Kleinias, as a citizen, did not choose that Knossos exist, that it have this law-code, or that it have Zeus as its founder. The greatest political act, the founding legislation, is out of his control. But more than that. Since this founding legislation was handed down by a god, it would be wrong, impious even, for him openly to question the goodness of this legislation. Citizenship in such a city is characterized more by obedience or even reverence than autonomy.22

The uniqueness of the situation within which the Stranger finds himself suggests that any attempts to aid the process of legislating will be a delicate one. Yet the solution is as unique as is the problem, for as we will see, the first step toward adapting the laws is not calling their foundations or legitimacy into question, but instead calling into question their meaning. The art of writing and the art of legislating come together in the end because they are held together by an activity of thought: interpretation.

**Part One: Reconciling the Good and the Noble**

Although its immense length suggests a great many themes are present within the *Laws*, we may nevertheless focus on a few that provide evidence for the project it is meant to effect. We have seen that philosophical eros, as it is embodied most profoundly in the person of Socrates, is a pure pursuit of wisdom, unfettered by the normal attachments that bind men together within political communities. The good for someone like Socrates is not the same, then, as it is for a common man who loves particular things in a normal way. Human eros is understood most usually as a love of one’s own, a beautiful particular that serves as the object of

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human longing. If Plato’s own divine art is to add to the Socratic way of life what is necessary for the erotic conditions experienced by most men, he will have to give to the noble and beautiful their due. Plato will have to love the beautiful as well, or at least play as if he does so as to convince men of this new beautiful legislation.

This noble play, however, will require that both versions of eros – the philosophical and what we might call the human – be reconciled. To reconcile these things is no simple matter, for it is not simply a question of giving each its proper due in good measure – such a procedure would only recreate the basic tension felt within the *Clouds*. No, both must be altered, and because the *Laws* will focus on the founding of regimes and legislation, the alteration of philosophy and politics must occur within the horizon of the political. More to the point, the reconciliation in the *Laws* will be for the sake of the political: to educate human eros such that it can be shepherded toward more gentle, and hence, more just relations. What one loves as one’s own can be educated through a reformation of the noble and beautiful because no matter how contentious, the beautiful remains as the means by which men recognize what they wish to be their own. It is for this reason that the reformation of the noble and beautiful is primarily a task of statesmanship. The *Laws* will be the least philosophic in a sense because it will assume philosophy more so than does any other dialogue. The outcome is the culmination of the Platonic project – both to show and to speak to the many for the sake of the many – for the sake of reforming politics such that a new, more just foundation might take hold.
The first theme that presents itself as necessary in the face of such a project is this reconciliation, this bringing together, however gently, of the good with the noble. This is accomplished within the *Laws* in an ingenious way, through a moderation of the love of one’s own, of human eros in its most unadulterated form, by appealing first to a new understanding of that which supports eros – the gods themselves. Platonic poetry truly is poetry, for within it comes a new testimony about the gods. While we will explore this in much greater detail later, a little must be said now so as to prepare the way for the first step in the education of politics. As many scholars have noted, the first word of the *Laws* is God. The significance of this is found in the congruence between the gods of the *Laws* and its legal codes. To put it rather succinctly, the gods of the *Laws* are the good, or better yet, the good is the gods themselves. In some ways the entire dialogue is devoted to a reformation of sorts, between the laws of the city and its gods such that the former reflect the latter as both the object of thought and the authors of divine and human goods alike. This is as it must be, for the political community rests upon a foundation that require that there be divine sanctions behind its laws. The *Laws* begins with the word “God” because this will be a comprehensive founding; the foundations for a wholly new form of politics must support this endeavor, especially if it is to be one grounded in thought.

Yet, in a strange but necessary irony, the new gods of the *Laws* are not so new after all. The dialogue is, after all, a conversation among three old men that has as its object the founding of

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a regime only after a great deal of initial ambivalence toward one another has been overcome. Even if the Stranger knows of it beforehand, it is quite some time before Kleinias admits his project, and only after the Stranger has impressed upon him and the Spartan the relevance of his Athenian insight. The Stranger must ingratiate himself to this group, and he does so not by attacking the legitimacy of the Cretan or Spartan laws, but by suggesting that they do not quite understand the meaning of those laws. He can do this because he assumes rather openly that the gods, which are the authors of those laws, are good, and hence, must have authored good laws that cannot be shown to be bad. When he shows his two interlocutors that their laws could not have been laid down merely for the sake of victory in war, the inference is not that the laws are bad, but instead that they must be misunderstood, because law is of necessity good. This subtle yet powerful tactic on the part of the Stranger ingratiates him with the old men because he is seen to be exceedingly pious, a piety they can trust and take confidence in as pious men themselves.

The newness of the gods in the *Laws* is found precisely in the one attribute the interlocutors’ gods, if not all gods simply, possess. The gods are good, and the trust these men place in the foundations of their laws is the product of a deep and unquestioned faith in the beneficence of the divine author. Plato develops this masterfully, suggesting both theoretically and practically that a reformation of politics begins with this first principle. Only by playing on the goodness of the gods can the Stranger piously question the Cretan and Spartan laws. In fact,

it becomes something of a pious necessity to do so, and Kleinias and Megillus are all too happy to comply once they have been shown the error of their pious ways.\footnote{Ibid., 635a1 - 635b2. One should also note the distinctly “Socratic” character of this procedure, which should dispel any lingering doubts over the philosophical nature of the dialogue. Yet the dialogue is not intent, so to speak, to point from inconsistent opinions toward the philosophical way of life. It is in this important regard that the dialogue is “un-Socratic.”} The first principle of Platonic politics, then, is theology; the reformation of the noble begins with the most beautifully good gods.

Because the will of the gods is altogether important for these men who will found a new city, they are willing to listen to, if not be criticized by, the Stranger’s speeches. Hence, when the Stranger asks of Kleinias, “For what reason has our law ordained the common meals, and also the gymnastic training and the weapons you employ?”, the Cretan responds openly, “so all these practices of ours exist with a view to war, and to me at least it appears that our lawgiver had this in view in everything he did.”\footnote{Ibid., 625c7 - 9, & 625d6 - 625e2.} Kleinias is proud of his laws, and the Stranger is able to use this pride against the Cretan, for if victory in war is the end of the divine law, then anyone who proved to be the victorious, no matter their character, would also be superior.\footnote{Ibid., 626e2 - 627b9. Hear too Strauss on this point: “Descending at the Athenian’s suggestion from the individual to the city, the Cretan observes that a city in which the better people vanquish the multitude, i.e., the inferior people, is superior to itself and most justly praised on account of that very victory. But when the Athenian thereupon suggests that if the unjust majority of the citizens overcomes and subdues a just minority, the city is inferior to itself or bad, the Cretan finds that suggestion very strange – for it implies that victory as victory is not good – but admits that it is most necessary to agree to it. The concern is no longer with}
that it is possible for men of inferior character to become superior in the city, the Stranger plays on Kleinias’ nobility in order to point him toward questions of quality instead of quantity.

The Athenian is quick to point out that true superiority involves questions of judging and deciding about proper measure. The end of the true judge is to reconcile warring parties; the aim of the city and its law is not war but in fact peace: “Which of these sets of circumstances would someone prefer: civil peace brought about by the destruction of some and the victory of others, or friendship as well as peace brought about through reconciliation – supposing it were necessary to pay attention to external enemies?” This short yet important exchange demonstrates the power of the Stranger’s rhetoric by reminding us of what is at stake. We saw that the essence of law was moderation, a moderation that attempted to educate while mediating between competing claims made by men with regard to justice. The city is the home of man’s eroticism because it gives eros its fulfilment while drawing boundaries and setting limits as to what is and is not acceptable. The pangs of injustice, the heat of indignation, are stoked because of man’s eroticism, or more appropriately, because men often infringe upon the objects of other men’s eros in an attempt to satisfy their own. In this brief exchange, the Stranger reminds us that law seeks to mediate the claims of right between men so as to produce harmony. The end of the

superiority to outsiders but with the right kind of inner structure.” Leo Strauss, The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws, pp. 4-5.


29 Ibid., 628b6 - 10.
law cannot then be war, for war is the result if men have no law. Instead, the law has a higher end, which the Stranger acknowledges when he says, “The best, however, is neither war nor civil war – the necessity of these things is to be regretted – but rather peace and at the same time good will towards one another.”

By getting Kleinias to open up to the question of true end of the law, the Stranger prepares the discussion for a new account of the city’s proper ends. In this respect, starting anew requires of the three men that they speak of virtue, for if the law is to educate and mediate well it must take its bearings from the proper excellence. It is no surprise that Kleinias and Megillus, the men reared by the laws that hold in esteem the love of victory, should hold that courage be the highest of the virtues. These most manly of men cannot resist, then, when the Stranger asks whether courage is “... a combat against fears and pains only, or also against longings and pleasures, and certain terrible cajoling flatteries that can turn to wax the spiritedness even of those who think themselves solemn?” For courage to be the noble virtue they want it

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30Ibid., 628c8 - 10.

31Note that it takes a good deal of persuasion to accomplish this feat. Kleinias is not altogether sure that he is wrong in thinking the Cretan and Spartan laws were made with a view to war. The Stranger disarms this reticence by speaking poorly of an Athenian poet who also took the same view of the end of the city as had Kleinias (but who was, incidentally, also a traitor). The Stranger also adds to this seemingly sacrificial example the rejoinder that it is not the law-givers who were wrong in saying what they did, but those whose responsibility it is to interpret those laws. Cf. 628e3 - 6, 629a4 - b5, & 630d2 - 7.

32Ibid., 633c11 - 633d4.
to be, it must be complete, which is to say, it must endure the sufferings of not just physical pain, but of all pain and even all pleasures. If the end of the law be courage, it must be a radically different form of courage, one that begins to look in its comprehensiveness like a certain form of moderation.

Enlarging the sphere of courage allows the Stranger to speak of moderation within the rhetorical horizons of courage. It also shows the two interlocutors, in a not wholly conscious way, that they have to be a good deal more thorough, if not harsh, about what they wish to encourage. The discussion about pain and pleasure in proper measure gives rise to what may be the oddest part of the *Laws*. In order to defend complete courage, the Stranger is compelled to defend a particularly Athenian institution: the drinking party. Without training with regard to pleasure, courage can only be a shade of itself, a pale reflection. Yet the idea of training oneself and one’s citizens with regard to pleasures seems a bit far-fetched, if not dangerous. Megillus is surely aware of this when he expresses his reservations about the wisdom of this “Athenian” practice. For the sake of introducing the proper stance toward pleasure, and hence the whole of virtue, the Stranger is willing to defend this institution, even if it is in a properly circumscribed manner.

33 Ibid., 636e5 - 637b8.
34 Ibid., 636e5 - 637b8.
It might seem a bit odd that a drinking party be a necessary component of education in virtue, and indeed, it probably is in truth something of a stretch. Nevertheless, having to defend this practice allows the Stranger, and hence the *Laws* itself, to do two things. First, the defense of drinking parties allows the Stranger to appear loyal, patriotic if you will.\(^{35}\) The Stranger comes to a defense of his own, even if it is a defense that points beyond itself more so than toward itself. By appearing patriotic, the Stranger’s defense encourages a kinship among him and Kleinias and Megillus; the two old men will have a better sense of the Stranger’s moral propriety, and thus less apprehension of his ideas.\(^{36}\) Second, by giving a defense of drinking parties the stranger is able to introduce the concept, and hence the question, of education. A drinking party on this account is like any other institution whose purpose is education. It has a leader, one who directs the activities but who is himself not apart of those activities, as well as those who will

\(^{35}\) By provoking Megillus’s attack on Athens, the Athenian makes himself appear to be forced to come to the defense of his fatherland and of the gods and peculiar religious customs of his people. He is thereby allowed to introduce and defend alien Athenian ways before old Dorians, in a manner which frees him from all suspicion and even disposes his audience somewhat in his favor. For every old patriot honors patriotism, even in his enemies. Every decent old patriot at once understand and sympathizes with the situation of a solitary old foreigner who finds himself compelled to speak out in defense of his native religious customs.” Thomas Pangle, “Interpretive Essay,” pp. 395-396.

\(^{36}\) In a way the Stranger purposively brings about the necessity of this defense by criticizing the rather unmanly result of the Cretan and Spartan’s virtue in courage, which is homosexuality. The Stranger is able to pique the ire of the old men, especially Megillus, by playing off of the “unnatural” and effete character of such practices. By attacking the inconsistency within their own virtue, the Stranger is able to set the stage for him to defend his own virtue, and thus, to appear in the part of the patriot. Cf. *Laws*, 636a5 - 636e4.
participate in the activities under his direction. A drinking party is then like a city because the leader sets down the rules for the party and then enforces them with a view to the education of the participants. The defense of this specifically Athenian institution, ostensibly brought about to demonstrate the Stranger’s patriotism, is in fact a tactic to get the old men to discuss the subject of law-giving, abstracting it from what they know or have been taught. The beginning of the *Laws* thus shows not only the obstacles, but also the necessary path to the reformation of politics.

By winning them over – by showing his own patriotism and devotion to the gods – the Stranger is able to slowly sway Kleiniyas and Megillus, first by getting them to listen to the merits of drinking parties, and then by showing them the link with education and law-giving. Yet the task is not finished, for their openness to his ideas can come only once the tie that attaches them to their own is loosened further. True political reform requires a theological reform of the beautiful, which is why his discussion of drinking parties and education necessarily evolves into a discussion of poetry and music. In the name of justice and piety the old men will have to become critics of the poets, the necessary if not sufficient condition for the founding of a new regime.

Drinking parties are useful tools for would-be legislator because they provide “the knowledge of the nature and habits of souls – . . . one of the things that is of the greatest use for the art whose business it is to care for souls. And we assert (I think) that that art is politics.”  

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37Ibid., 650b6 - 9.
If care for souls is what is meant by politics, then surely this suggests that the statesman, nay, the law-giver, is an artisan, if not the artisan. And as an artisan the law-giver would presumably want to set down as law those commandments which instruct the nature and habits of the soul with regard to what is best for the soul. The law-giver must then know what habits are best for what souls, especially when souls are most open to education:

The Stranger was correct to usher in a critical attitude toward poetry, as it is through poetry and music that the soul is taught about the beautiful, and hence, how it comes to recognize what it considers to be its own. Poetry and music do this by giving a voice to that which the soul finds pleasing, by giving a visible and audible expression to those thoughts and emotions each soul has within itself: “Most people do say, at least, that the criterion for correct music is its power to provide pleasure to the souls.” Giving the soul what it likes is not quite the same as giving what it needs, and with this realization comes not only a recognition of the power of poetry and music, but also the need to judge its influence.

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38 Ibid., 653d7 - 654a8.

39 Ibid., 655c9 -655d2.
“Choral performances are imitation of characters, in all sorts of action and fortune, and each brings to bear both his habitual dispositions and his capacity to imitate.”\textsuperscript{40} Poetry and music instruct by imitation, by giving voice to those opinions and emotions found within the soul. In a way, poetry and music are the expressions of the love of one’s own – they not only take their bearings from one’s own opinions, but they transcend and ennoble those opinions in such a way as to transmit them to other souls. The successful poet is he who gives to the audience that in which their souls delight. What is more, the most successful of the poets is he who tells the grandest of tales that play off of the soul’s opinions and emotions. The greatest poets are those whose tales arouse the greatest fear and anger, and in whose poetry the occasion and correction of injustice is displayed most brilliantly. The greatest poets are those men like Homer and Hesiod who can paint a landscape within which the audience finds gods who are concerned with the world and its order. The poets create the gods and thus give a voice to the collective opinions about justice of the many. It is for this reason, however, that poetry is both indispensable and dangerous.

By giving a voice to the opinions of the many, the poets in truth cement those opinions by perpetuating them through expression, especially that prose which serves to educate the young. The city and the poet stand together within an internal dialectic, where each takes it bearing from the other. The poet is the teacher of the many because, in an important way, he is

\textsuperscript{40}Ibid., 655d7 - 9.
taught by the many. The necessity yet ambivalence with regards to poetry prompts the Stranger to say,

Where there are or will some day be fine laws laid down regarding the education and play which concerns the Muses, do we suppose that poets will be allowed to teach the children of those who live under good laws, and the young men in the choruses, whatever the poet himself finds pleasing in the rhythm or tune or words of poetry, so that he makes them similar to whatever the happens to be as regards virtue or wickedness?41

The Stranger is aware of how important poetry is to the city, yet its importance does not ensconce its preeminence, and he is quick to establish what will be the necessary hierarchy of poetry to politics within what will be their wholly new city. Utilizing a certain harshness that finds favor with Kleinias, the Stranger tells the men of the ancient Egyptian laws that censor poetry for the good of the whole:

[This is] An extreme in lawgiving and political art. There are other features in their law that you would find pretty poor. But this much is true and worthy of thought: it was possible to be firm about such things, and mandate in law songs which are by nature correct. This would have to be the work of a god or someone divine – even as they claim there that the songs which have been preserved for this long time were the poetry of Isis. So, as I said, if someone could grasp in any way what is correct in these things, he ought boldly to order it in law. The search, dictated by pleasure and pain, for a music that is continually new brands the sanctified chorus “old-fashioned”; but this will not have a very corrupting effect on a chorus that has been made sacred. In that land, at any rate, it has probably had no corrupting power; entirely the contrary.42

The prohibitions against newness and innovation point back to the sanctity of the old, and in doing so, acknowledge firmly the importance of the first stories of the gods and their relationship

41Ibid., 656c1 - 8.

42Ibid., 657a3 - 657b9.
to the whole. The reform of the noble – the poetry that will speak of the true gods – must be established before any new laws can be laid.

Within the horizons of political life the reconciliation of the good and the noble requires having the noble reflect, in so far as is possible, the philosophical good such that the distance between citizen and philosopher might be minimized. This means that the beautiful must be reconstituted so that the intensity of man’s desire for particular objects is lessened while nevertheless providing for the satisfaction of man’s bodily needs. The Stranger effects this change at the level of poetry first, for if the will and actions of the city’s gods do not match the city’s laws, then what is noble will remain contradictory, and the citizens will be torn in their allegiance between what they hold to be publicly noble versus what they think to be privately good. To reform the nature of politics requires that man’s eros be educated properly, a requirement that entails systematically reinforcing the notion that what is best for man is a life of what now begins to look like moral virtue. Men must be taught that what is best for them is in fact what they really long for – their virtue must be shown to be their highest fulfillment.

Now, to achieve this within the realm of political action, that virtue must be shown to be the most pleasant of activities, for most men understand their own good in an immediate sense. The good that men love is their own, and in so far as they are in possession of it, their love is a positive thing – they take pleasure in their attainment of the objects of their affection. Men may recognize that the noble is both necessary for political life and beautiful in its sacrifice, but not
agree that it is a key component of their happiness. Thus the congruence of the good and the noble is the object of political education, for in it lies the very possibility of human happiness. Without the noble the city is no more; political life requires sacrifice from its citizens if the polis is to continue. Yet without the city human life, and with it the human goods, are no more, which brings about the paradox confronting the law-giver. Kleinias himself manifest this very ambivalence over the good and the noble.\textsuperscript{43}

For this reason the Stranger maintains that, “This is the same thing the correct lawgiver will persuade – or, if he cannot persuade, compel – the poet to do in his beautiful and praiseworthy phrases: to create poetry correctly by depicting in rhythms and harmony the postures and songs of moderate, courageous, and wholly good men.”\textsuperscript{44} Moreover, the would-be lawgiver must, “. . . compel the poets to say that the good man, being moderate and just, is happy and blessed, whether he be great and strong or small and weak, whether he be rich or not.”\textsuperscript{45} And finally, as if to proclaim what we have already deduced:

So then the argument which does not split the pleasant from the just, and the good from the noble, is (if nothing else) persuasive in making some willing to live the pious and just life. And this means that for a lawgiver, at least, the most shameful and most opposed to arguments is the one that fails to declare that these things are so. For no one would voluntarily be willing to be persuaded to do that which does not bring him more joy than pain.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., 662a7.

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 660a4 - 660a8.

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., 660e2 - 5.

\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., 663b1 - 8.
This new poetry and these new gods sanctify virtue, that form of education in moderation that reconciles the truly good with the noble in such a way as to reform politics through the tempering of the love of one’s own. The citizens of this new city will be taught one lesson in one voice – there will be no detraction from the testimonies to virtue. The *Laws* teaches that the first step, in practice and in drama, to the reformation of politics is the bringing of the gods and the laws in line with regard to man’s proper end. Once this first step has been prepared, we are ready for the next general theme in the *Laws*’ overall project.

**Part Two: Preludes**

The second theme is one to be mentioned and acknowledged more than to be discussed. It should be clear at this point that the founding of a new regime, to say nothing of the reformation of politics, is no easy endeavor. Educating the many requires educating opinions about one’s own, clarifying the ambiguities that lie beneath the surface of human life but which are rarely if ever exposed. It is understandable that the first step toward a new political orientation was the reconciliation of the good with the noble, for without the congruence of the two the root causes of injustice, and hence civil strife, remain shrouded in the inconsistencies of political life out of which they emerge. Yet bringing together the poets and politicians with regard to the equivalence of the good and the noble is only the necessary condition for the reconciliation. The laws themselves must be made to support this, or more accurately, the laws and the gods must be brought together and bound by an intermediary – a political daemon if you will. We find this
The Athenian now proposes a correction to what he had said about the twofoldness of the law, for the uncorrected statement has fulfilled its purpose. His proposal arises from a consideration of what the three men had been saying from the beginning till now, from dawn to noon. (If we assume that about the same amount of time is needed for the conversations in V-VIII and in IX-XII as was needed for those in I-IV, we reach the conclusion that the conversations in IX-XII – they are chiefly devoted to the penal law – take place in the evening, and the discussion of the Nocturnal Council toward the end of XII takes place in the dusk, if not after nightfall. Cf. Phaedo 116b5-6 and e1-2. The present conversation takes place while they are sitting in the shade: for how long? Till the end of VIII?) From the beginning they have conversed about laws, but only now do they begin to pronounce laws; everything which preceded consisted of preludes or preambles to laws.” Leo Strauss, The Argument and the Action of Plato’s Laws, p. 64.
of their lawgivers that they mix persuasion together with coercion for the sake of education, a
demand that leads one to have the other say;

In this regard, it’s likely that none of the lawgivers has ever reflected on the fact that it is possible
to use two means of giving laws, persuasion and violence (insofar as the uneducated condition of
the mob permits). They have used only the latter; failing to mix compulsion with persuasion in
their lawgiving, they have employed unmitigated violence alone. But I, O blessed ones, see the
need for yet a third way of handling laws, one not at all in use nowadays.48

If the regime is to be new, if it is to effect a change in the actual practice of political life, it will
need a new catalyst that emphasizes the reasonableness within even its most unreasonable
aspects.

The new theology and law educate and moderate human eros by opening up the love of
one’s own to the claims of reason, and thus making it less beholding to its own particularity. The
new justice of the law seeks to moderate the competing claims of right by gently weakening the
contradictions that lie at the heart of human longing; by loosening the claims human eros makes
on the objects it takes as its own and reattaching them within a new horizon of justice and
moderation, the *Laws* seeks a change that looks more like an actualization than a reformation.

Man is no longer in a position to have to choose between his private good and that of the city,
because both become fully integrated within an organic whole – the new order of the cosmos is
facilitated by a daemon of the highest order. The preludes are this necessary step, this political
daemon; the preludes link the gods and the city together in a reasonable and coherent manner,

48 *Laws*, 722b6 -722c5.
where the hierarchy of being becomes established within the new order of the polis. This is
what the Stranger means when, speaking of the need for preludes to the law, he says;

For it became clear to me that this whole speech, which the speaker gives in order to persuade, is
delivered with just this end in view: so that he who receives the law uttered by the legislator
might receive the command – that is, the law – in a frame of mind more favorably disposed and
therefore more apt to learn something. That’s why, according to my argument at least, this would
correctly be called a “prelude” rather than an “argument” of the law.

The new regime teaches men, in so far as they are educable, through the use of speeches. They
are instructed how they are to understand their good in relation to the good of others, as well as
that of the city; what they desire to be their own is taught with consistency by the gods, the laws
and the preludes to the laws. In this way the necessary link between god and man establishes the
unity of the good, noble and just such that there are no inconsistent opinions lying within the
hearts of the citizens.

All of this is not to say, however, that Plato’s project was a precursor to the modern
enlightenment. The Laws is just what it says it is – law. The Stranger recognizes that the

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49 The Laws is an ending at which the wisdom of age is transmitted to the future
generations. The principal instruments for this transmission are the great prooemia, the main
body of the Laws itself. And indeed, ‘a divine afflatus’ seems to have guided the wanderers and
their conversation on this longest day (811c). The discourse had begun ‘at dawn,’ and now, in
the middle of the way (the passage is to be found actually at approximately the physical center
of the Laws), the Athenian Stranger becomes aware that, under the divine guidance, ‘this compact
discourse of his composition’ has become ‘rather like a poem,’ that he has created a form of
spiritual poetry that most suitably will furnish the model for the sacred art of the new polis, the
art in which the spirit will be kept alive (811).” Eric Voegelin, “Plato and Aristotle,” p. 229.

50 Laws, 723a6 - 723b3.
fundamental harshness of political life cannot be abstracted from; one must be willing to punish those who cannot be or refuse to be taught. The gentleness of the dialogue is only one aspect among a litany that emphasizes the order which must often be compelled. The Stranger is not Socrates; he can marshal spiritedness in the service of the city and its citizens when necessary. Yet he only does this when the extent of the available persuasion has been exhausted, and then only in due measure. The *Laws* truly does provide for political life all that it needs, and does so in such as way as to instruct it as to the proper measure of those things most needful. And it is precisely this instruction that sets it apart.

The substance as well as the function of the preludes also point to another of the crucial aspects of Platonic poetry, an aspect unknown in the Socratic dialogues. The preludes and laws together are used to educate human eros that is not nor will ever become philosophic. After detailing aspects of the regime involving its ruling offices, sacrifices, public education and festivals, the Stranger explains how a city that will be brought together in a hitherto unprecedented way will nevertheless preserve itself with regard to aspects that are essentially private – especially the erotic aspects. There is no abolition of property or community of women and children; instead, the well-founded regime will be the one that recognizes the problem of eros while offering tenable solutions. The Stranger notes the problem directly; “but with regard to the erotic love of women for men and of men for women, whence tens of thousands of things
have happened to human beings in private and to whole cities, how could one take proper precautions?"51

The straightforward solution, taking into account the education of the entire dialogue up to this point, is to strengthen the foundations of the family, an institution that, as far as is possible, has been made amenable to the ends of the city:

Either no one is to dare to touch any well-born and free person except the woman who is his wife, and no one is to sow unhallowed, bastard sperm in concubines or go against nature and sow sterile seed in males; or we should abolish erotic activity between males altogether, and in the case of women, if anyone should have sexual intercourse with a woman other than those who enter his house with the sanction of the gods and the sacred marriage ceremonies, whether they be purchased or secured in any other way, and fails to escape the notice of all men and women, we would probably seem to be legislating correctly if we legislated that he should be barred from all honors in the city on the grounds that he is really a stranger.52

Educated human eros finds its home in what is always had; the ends of men will remain the same as before. Man will still love a beautiful particular as his own, but what he holds to be beautiful has now been altered in light of the beautiful new gods and their laws. The fundamental erotic association has been placed within the horizons of a new city, one that mitigates the potential damages done by erotic associations. The citizens have been taught to hold as noble what they should – their enduring human attachments – and disregard those things held in esteem by improper education, such as wealth, possessions and the immoderate love of bodies. The family properly situated in this context gives man what he needs, for his erotic preferences are informed

51Ibid., 836a7 - 836b4.
52Ibid., 841d3 - 841e5.
by laws and gods that speak in a unified voice. He is neither pulled between the vulgar yet powerful good of the unmitigated body and the noble but self-effacing needs of the community, nor is he forced to choose between the good of his family and the city’s good. There will be no Strepsiades in the Laws, as its citizens will not understand their family’s good in opposition to that of the city. And this because they will not hold to be good and beautiful what he held to be good and beautiful; Pheidippides’ love of horses finds no parallel in the Laws. The organic nature of the whole, of the gods, the law and the preludes places man into a setting that instructs him as to what he should want as well as to what is shameful, and in doing so, reconciles those contradictions the root of which was his own unfettered longing.

The Laws is thus at once both a revolutionary and conservative tract; it effects change while preserving roots. It takes what is given and attempts, within the limits imposed by nature, to bring about the best state of affairs. Again, the dialogue does this dramatically and practically; it convinces two old men about what is most needful with regard to law while convincing its readers of the same. But there is one thing remaining if this new project is to be complete, if, in fact, a new foundation can be effected through the insights of wisdom. As we mentioned before and must now take up at greater length, the reconciliation of the good and the noble, the reformation of poetry, and even the preludes all stand or fall by the new theology found within the dialogue.53 Plato’s rhetoric must be marshaled in the service of education, the most important

53But what of the regime itself? Is there no significance to the distribution of offices with regard to the education of eros? On this point, hear Eric Voegelin: “The purpose of the
step of which are the gods that support human justice, and hence, the laws of the new city. To complete our broad sketch of the *Laws* then requires of us that we understand what the citizens must understand, i.e., not only that the gods are good, but that they can be shown to exist through reason, that they take an interest in their lives, and that they support justice rightly understood.

**Part Three: The Theology of the Laws**

Our entire examination has pointed toward the ability Plato possessed but which was not shared by Socrates. He could speak to an entire city, giving to each what their soul demanded while binding all within a new whole that serves as the foundation for a new conception of justice. His education of politics was with a view to improving politics, to moderating the erotic attachments possessed by all men just enough that they be made harmonious – that the noble might better reflect the good for philosopher and citizen alike. To educate eros in this way is also
to educate eros’ sibling—thumos—for eros taught to desire the truly noble will produce thumos
that desires victory over the truly unjust. A healthy defense of one’s own, to say nothing of the
righteous indignation that follows from an injustice against one’s own, can only be made proper if
what is one’s own has itself been made proper. And this was Plato’s plan all along, to show that
what lies at the core of political life must be educated if not only philosophy was to be possible,
but also that politics itself was to be preserved.

Specifically, the reformation of politics brings with it the necessity of a reform in
theology, a reform that links the gods together with the lives of men in the proper way. True,
Socrates himself may have been the originator of this, for Plato freely shows his Socrates
involved in disputes concerning the gods. But the gods for Socrates care little for men, and in so
far as they do show an interest in human life, it is only in that way of life most like their own.54
The gods may offer divine support for natural right, for that right by nature which makes a claim
to rule based on wisdom, but politics is not guided primarily by wisdom. And to the extent
wisdom does not inform the laws or regime, Socrates never was seen to advance the position that

54 A persuasive defense of Socrates is probably possible in these and other instances, but
the Clouds makes us wonder whether these defenses could be entirely successful. Certainly the
Platonic Socrates’ theoretical grasp of the soul is far-reaching; one need only think of the
impressive psychology of the Republic. Still, even Plato makes us wonder how adequately
Socrates applied his insights in his dealings with ordinary men. One might contrast the Athenian
stranger of Plato’s Laws, from whose words the gods are rarely absent, with Socrates, whose
allusions to the divine are usually taken by his listeners to be ironic.” Thomas West,
“Introduction,” Four Texts on Socrates, trans. Thomas G. and Grace Starry West (Ithaca:
the gods cared for human justice, for the erotic cares of non-philosophical men. It was Plato who was referred to in antiquity as divine, not daemonic, and there is good reason for this.\textsuperscript{55} If the pursuit of wisdom does culminate in political philosophy, in the realization that the art of statesmanship is an essential aspect of the philosophical way of life, then only he who can bring down the gods from the heavens in support of a worthy city’s laws can claim the title philosopher.\textsuperscript{56}

But how is one to do such a thing? Surely we have seen that by equating the good with the god, Plato goes a long way toward establishing a positive ground for a new politics. Is not such an act sufficient? Were it that Plato was constructing a city in speech whose effect was to be nothing but the education of politically ambitious young men, then the simple equation of god with the most sublime of goods would be the final word.\textsuperscript{57} But then the indelible mark Socrates left on the \textit{Republic} would render the \textit{Laws} unnecessary. No, the gods must care for all men, not just philosophers, and they must support human justice, not simple that way of life which has precious little to do with other men. The gods must support political right along with natural right, for while the only indubitable claim to rule might be that of the wise, the reality of political life is that man’s eros, which makes claims of right in regard to its objects, also makes political


\textsuperscript{56}\textit{Phaedrus}, 276e4 - 277a5.

\textsuperscript{57}Cf. \textit{Republic} as a whole.
claims on behalf of itself, its own object. If man’s love of his own is the primary force in human existence, it follows that what is most his own – his body and soul – would be the most powerful considerations in his life. And if men love themselves, which they most certainly do, then the right they stake to that claim suggests that man is by nature political, for his right to himself entails a freedom that makes him a master of himself. No matter how attenuated the claim of political right might be in light of the natural right supporting the rule of the wise, no education of eros would be complete without this last, most important realization. The gods must support the polis, must support political life, for no matter how informed or wise a city’s laws might be made, they are nevertheless always found within a horizon, not of wisdom, but of consent.

58 Laws, 885a6 - 8.

59 Spiritedness must be subservient to philosophy, whereas desire, eros, in its highest form is philosophy. Here we touch on the point of the deepest agreement between Plato and Aristophanes. As desire for superiority, spiritedness becomes in the case of sensible men the desire for recognition by free men. It is therefore essentially related to political liberty, hence to law, and hence to justice. Similarly, as essentially deferential, it is a sense of shame, which as such bows primarily to the ancestral, the primary manifestation of the good. For both reasons it is essentially related to justice.” Leo Strauss, The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1989), p. 167.

60 The right mixture is that of wisdom and freedom, of wisdom and consent, of the rule of wise laws framed by a wise legislator and administered by the best members of the city and of the rule of the common people.” Leo Strauss, “Plato,” History of Political Philosophy, p. 82.
The drama of the *Laws* began by playing off of Kleinias’ and Megillus’ piety so as to endear them to the opinions of the Stranger. It was sufficient in the beginning that the gods were equated with the good, but as the dialogue has moved forward, the need arises for a more firm and thorough articulation of the city’s divine ground of being. In particular, as the penal laws themselves are developed after the domestication of eros in books seven and eight, the most serious of crimes arises that threatens the foundations of the law itself. Of course, this crime is impiety, but the *Laws* will not respond by simply putting the impious to death. No, the new city demands that persuasion be marshaled in support of the laws and gods, who can be shown to exist. The new city will take up the claims of the impious head on, refusing to coerce belief that is not in itself reasonable. The impious must be reasoned with – persuaded – such that they see the error of their ways. The divine support of political right, then, comes about naturally from within the drama of the dialogue, but nevertheless in such a way as to show the absolute necessity of that support.

The Stranger begins the discussion of the gods by maintaining the involuntary nature of crime:

> No one who believes in gods according to the laws has ever voluntarily done an impious deed or let slip an illegal utterance unless he is suffering one of three things: either this, which I just said, he doesn’t believe; or, second, he believes they exist but that they do not think about human beings; or, third, he believes they are easily persuaded if they are brought sacrifices and prayers.\(^{61}\)

\(^{61}\) *Laws*, 885b6 - 12.
Because the gods are the authors of all goods, and because all men love their own, which is now
good, it makes no sense that men act impiously. The only reason for a man to commit a crime is
because he does not believe in the gods, and hence, does not know what the good is he seeks. His
impiety must be remedied with speeches showing his faulty reasoning, and to do this, the
Stranger gives a powerful voice to those who would disagree with the city’s piety. According to
the Stranger, the rejoinder to the impious goes something like this:

Now we demand, just as you demanded in regard to the laws, that before you direct harsh threats
at us, you try to persuade and teach that there are gods, adducing adequate evidence, and that they
are too good to be turned aside and beguiled from what is just by certain gifts. For as it is now,
since we hear these and other such things from those who are said to be best among the poets,
orators, diviners, and priests, as well as from myriads upon myriads of others, most of us don’t
turn to refraining from doing unjust things, but rather try to make healing amends after we’ve done
demands. From lawgivers who are claiming to be not savage but gentle, we demand that persuasion
be used on us first.\footnote{Ibid., 885c8 - 885e3.}

The Stranger prepares an occasion by which the laws of the city might be defended from those
who would challenge its justice. At the same time it also provides what will be the most
theoretical discussion found within the \textit{Laws}.\footnote{That the most theoretical discussion occurs in the context of theology suggest Plato is intent on establishing philosophy as an aspect of statesmanship.}

The Stranger adduces arguments against the three claims of the impious – that the gods do
not exist, do not care for human beings, and can be bribed – in a direct and systematic fashion.
The arguments depend on one another, such that the third depends on the second, and the second
in turn on the first. For this reason the first argument is longest; yet the argument for the
existence of the gods also has another function. The gods’ existence establishes the order of society within an order of being that is intelligible and harmonious. The city’s good and the gods go together because the former can be deduced from the latter according to reason. The Stranger does not have recourse here to the authority of tradition or revelation. Instead, he makes use of philosophical rhetoric that links being and becoming, change and permanence, with the existence of the gods. The Stranger’s strategy here is important, for in it one sees not only how Platonic theology is grounded primarily in the philosophical intelligibility of motion, but also how that very intelligibility points beyond itself, toward something within which motion becomes meaningful.

It is not the case, as the impious believe, that nature stands in contradistinction to art and those things to which art is most akin, particularly politics and the soul. If that were the case, the soul and those things with which the soul is surrounded – opinion, supervision, intelligence, art, and law – would be derivative of nature, which the impious believe to be merely bodies.64 That which is most human – man’s soul – would be epi-phenomenal, understandable with reference to the motion of the bodies within which the soul resides. But in their attempt to understand the whole of being, they have confused cause with effect. The soul that aspires to know can only be the product of the object of knowledge if that object somehow makes the very aspiration possible. Otherwise, the knowledge-seeking soul becomes a paradox, one out of which

there is no path. How do bodies and motion come to wonder about themselves, about their very nature? Nature is not merely coming into being—unintelligible motion—but is rather an intelligible whole where soul is prior to body. Hence, the Stranger maintains; “the arguments which have shaped the soul of the impious have asserted that what is in fact the first cause of the coming into being and passing away of all things is not first, but has come into being later, and that what in fact comes later comes earlier. That is why they have fallen into error concerning the real existence of gods.”65 If one is to reason and inquire into the nature of the whole, nature must support such inquiry; the soul’s desire to understand is unintelligible if the soul is merely the sum of its parts.

Once he has reoriented the intellectual playing field, the Stranger links the intelligibility of the whole with both nature and the soul; “nature, they mean to say, is the coming into being connected with the first things. But if soul is going to appear first, and not fire or air, and it’s soul that has come into being among the first things, it would be most correct, almost, to say that it is especially by nature.”66 The soul and nature are animated by the same principle, which in turn looks very much like an argument we have already seen; “therefore we will assert that the motion which moves itself, since it is the ruling cause of all motions, as well as the first to have come into being among things standing still, and the first to exist among things moving, is

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66Ibid., 892c2 - 892c6.
necessarily the eldest and the strongest transformation of all, while the motion that is altered by another and moves others is second." All of being is moved into becoming because of the motion set forth by the first, eldest soul. This soul is that of the god, which stands as the eternal source of motion. Nature’s intelligibility is the product of the first motion inspired by god, as is the human soul’s desires and motivations. The nature of being is thus linked together, with its intelligibility established through the order it manifests:

Soul then drives all things in heaven, on earth, and in the sea through its motions – which are named wishing, investigating, supervising, deliberating, opining correctly and falsely, rejoicing, being pained, being bold, being fearful, hating, and desiring – and through all the motions that are akin to these or primary; these take over the secondary motions of bodies and drive all things to growth and decay, separation and coalescence, and to what follows these – heat, cold, heaviness, lightness, hard and soft, light and dark, bitter and sweet; soul makes use of all these and, every time it takes as a helper Intelligence – god, in the correct sense, for the gods – it guides all things toward what is correct and happy, while when it associates with lack of intelligence it produces in all things just the opposite to these.68

The arguments the Stranger adduces in opposition to the claim the gods do not exist has the intended effect – they establish the intelligibility and coherence of the whole through the use of reason. The arguments also provide the necessary foundation for what remains, which is showing that the gods are concerned with human affairs, and hence, with political right. The Stranger acknowledges there is much reason to suppose the gods’ disinterest in human matters.69

Nevertheless, since the gods are good, and since it is they with whom we share soul, the gods


68Laws, 896e8 - 897b5.

69Ibid., 899d8 - 900b4.
cannot help but to have oversight of human affairs, for they manifest a form of virtue that
pervades all things. In fact, theirs is the greatest of virtue, for in it one can find comprehensive
virtue, which includes moderation, intelligence, courage, nobility, care, industriousness, frugality,
omniscience, omnipotence, goodness and wisdom. Because of the gods’ complete virtue, they
are incapable of neglecting human affairs; their power beholds large and small things alike,
whether it be the workings of the cosmos or of a single man’s soul. And because they exercise
supervisory care over all things in accordance with their virtue, the gods cannot be appeased in
their hatred of injustice. Quite the opposite, because of their virtue, the gods support justice
most sincerely, and hence their supervision of human affairs is beyond reproach and altogether
perfect: “For that gods exist, and exercise supervision over human beings, I at least would claim
has been demonstrated by us, in a not altogether paltry fashion. But that gods can be appeased
by the unjust, if they get gifts, is something one ought not go along with, and that ought also to
be refuted by every means in one’s power.”

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70 Ibid., 899b3 - 11.
71 Ibid., 900d6 - 902b3.
72 But what then of the existence of evil? The Stranger counter this point at 903c. One
would do well to consider this rejoinder in light of Republic 420b1 - 421c1.
73 Laws, 905d4 - 9. For a more nuanced view of the gods’ support for human justice and
political right, cf. Laws 904c7 - 905c5 with Republic 614b3 - 621b7 with specific reference to the
service to which each myth is put.
The *Laws* concludes its systematic reorientation of politics with a comprehensive new theology, one capable of serving the functions it must: as a home to intellectual thought as well as the basis for a sound, stable political community. The gods now support political right within the framework of this new city, for only when eros has been educated properly can the gods be said to support what most men wish they would. Kleinias and Megillus are persuaded; they understand the need to establish proper foundations if their new city, the city within the drama, is to be governed well. To this end, the dialogue recognizes the need the two men feel of the Stranger’s wisdom, a need that now expresses itself politically. And the function of the dialogue itself in time and space has been fulfilled, for it completes the Platonic corpus in such a way that the complete, nay, the perfect philosopher is shown to be one who possesses the art of statesmanship – the man who is able to lead the many and few alike. Our prolegomena ends, then, where a new study begins, for we must now approach the texts anew, seeking to understand in an ever fuller way how each dialogue within the corpus plays a role within the dramatic whole that itself, in its own way, reflects the greater whole of which it is part. One begins this task with the fresh vision that the author of our dialogues is in some respects the analogue to the author of the whole.

**Conclusion**

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\(^{74}\textit{Laws, 969c5 - 969d3.}\)
We have come a long way only to realize we have just begun. The *Laws* represents both our beginning and end; to have answered the question of why Plato wrote is at the same time to be thrown back to those writings with renewed vigor and even greater intensity. The laws were the perfect topic for the un-Socratic dialogue, for while every law is authoritative in speaking to all, only a few can understand its meaning. Interpretation plays as great a role in the *Laws* as in any Platonic dialogue—more maybe—precisely because laws do not speak to individuals differently on the surface. Their universality is their strength, their way of mediating between particulars. Yet the entire enterprise of the *Laws* is the work of a philosopher engaging in an essential aspect of philosophy—statesmanship. The act of law-giving is that act which educates completely, and, in Plato’s sense, is what separated him from Socrates. The divine Plato used the daemonic Socrates in the ways in which the historical man could be used, yet when the time was appropriate, the daemon had to be transcended in the name of the gods. Yet there is one aspect of Plato’s theology that remains to be discussed, and our examination cannot draw to a close until it has been explored.

One might get the impression having read all this that Plato’s completeness over and above Socrates’ consisted only in his being able to lie, i.e., in his ability to lead men by lying to them about the nature of the gods and the whole. Tragedy involves the telling of half-truths, a lesson we learned long ago, and one is tempted to say of Plato that his art of statesmanship is merely the art of lying—the ability to tell people what they will like while subtly also giving
them what they will need. From this it would follow that Plato’s education, his great art of law-giving, is a gracious but very real exercise in lying, for the benefit of those educated to be sure, but nevertheless an act of deception. Are we to say that Plato’s art is simply ironic esotericism, amounting to a glorious noble lie?

In a way, we must admit there is a great deal of truth in this. The same man who wrote the *Laws* also has his characters in another dialogue draw the necessary distinction between the single wise man that should rule and the many unwise who should not.\(^\text{75}\) To follow this logic to its conclusion, however, would suggest that there is no truth to the theology of the *Laws*; that the stories of the gods are simply given for their necessary and salutary effects on the regime. Such is not an implausible stance, but it will no be the stance taken by our examination, for we have seen one small, almost negligible facet of Plato’s theology that is in fact of the utmost importance. It would not be a stretch, in fact it would be entirely appropriate, if we were to say that the whole question of Plato’s theology stands and falls by our understanding of the status of the soul.

The Stranger used the intelligibility of the whole as an important point against the impious who maintain the gods are not. According to the argument, if the whole, and within that whole the thinking being, are to be intelligible, if motion is to have some order that controls the process of coming into being, then that whole need have as its principle the gods who themselves

\(^{75}\text{Republic, 473c8 - 473e5.}\)
manifest the order of being. Now, it is true that the Stranger’s argument does not necessarily prove the existence of the gods, for while the intelligibility of the whole must have a foundation, that foundation need not be the gods, or any other being beyond being. There remains a point adduced in all of this, however, that survives the weakness of the argument. The Stranger goes to great lengths to include a discussion of the soul as a part of the argument against those who would reduce the whole to a nature the motion within which is wholly without order. And while it may be true that self-initiating motion does not prove the existence of gods who are concerned with political right, these arguments nevertheless point out, albeit quietly, that the soul with which we are familiar – the human soul – somehow transcends the sum of its parts. It is this soul of which all human beings have immediate experience that is the key to the mysterious irreducible whole.

We have seen that eros is more than mere bodily desire, that human eroticism can only exist within a framework of beauty and order if it is to actualize itself. More to the point, bodily gratification and procreation were only the accidental effects of eros, whose real desire was to complete itself with that which it did not possess. Plato shows us that the human species, if its bodily nature is to be perpetuated, must look up, must look beyond itself toward that which made it forget about itself, if only temporarily. The soul longs for the beautiful that is its own, and only once it has a taste of that can the needs of the body be satisfied. But by saying this,

one necessarily says, in a most un-modern way, that the soul is not reducible to the sum of its parts, that instead the parts are unintelligible without some prior knowledge of the whole. A man’s erotic desire for a particularly beautiful women is not the direct result of his genes or his brain chemistry, but instead of his desire for that beautiful one who might complete him. Those secondary characteristics of the body only serve to provide the necessary conditions of eros; the sufficient conditions of love transcend the body in such a way as to make the body appear irrelevant. It is for this reason that the lover, when in love, experiences the phenomenon of the manifest beautiful, and not the workings of his body’s many parts. Someone in the grips of love does not see in his beloved the vehicle by which the human species perpetuates itself. Instead, he sees his beautiful beloved, an experience that does not beg of nor need an additional or ulterior explanation. In fact, it does not really permit of one.77 And to the extent to which his

77 On this point, consider what Allan Bloom says when discussing Alfred Kinsey; “But the question remains whether it is possible to study man, as opposed to the other animals, without taking account of will, reason, and imagination. These are the distinctively human faculties that allow sex to actualize itself as eros in human beings. Animals have sex and human being have eros, and no accurate science is possible without making this distinction. Kinsey pays no attention to the fact that animals, although they indulge themselves whenever they can, have a much smaller range of sexual desires, almost exclusively directed toward procreation. The strange variety of human sexual desires points toward an indeterminateness that requires molding for a truly human life. It is comparable to the indeterminateness in human beings requiring politics, which the brute animals have no need of.” Allan Bloom, Love and Friendship (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 19.
experiences are unintelligible with reference to the inner workings of his body, recourse to a natural explanation without order simply cannot describe the phenomenon for what it is.\textsuperscript{78}

This realization of eros’ primacy, of its unintelligibility apart from the beautiful, is a signal that the soul, which is the home of eros, is for the same reasons unintelligible without reference to something higher. As the Stranger maintained, the soul is more than the sum of its parts, and while we may have no direct access to a world, cosmic, or divine soul, each man, and especially the man who is self-reflective, is in possession of a soul whose wholeness is both given to experience as well as mysterious. If the only soul with which we have experience is somehow more than the sum of its parts, then its very wholeness escapes us in its transcendence.

We are led to this conclusion not as an article of faith; quite the contrary, it is forced on us as a matter of analytical honesty. That phenomenon which somehow makes us whole, which gives an intelligibility to the whole of which we are part, is itself mysterious, incomprehensible as the object of its own desire to know. It is its very intelligibility through experience yet mysteriousness through wholeness that animates the entire Platonic corpus; the soul is the principal theme throughout the dialogues because it alone is the key to knowledge of the whole. And yet its very intelligibility and mysteriousness are what link Platonic philosophy with theology, for the place of the soul within the whole itself remains both clear and inexplicable:

Modern philosophy was a rebellion against both classical rationalism and biblical religion. The skepticism that accompanied Socratic rationalism applied necessarily to the enterprise of Socratic

\textsuperscript{78}Cf. Nietzsche, \textit{Beyond Good and Evil}, aphorism 137.

355
rationalism. That is to say, Socratic rationalism had to grant the premise that supplied the
ground of faith. The reason in skepticism for continuing an endless inquiry, and the reason for
ending such inquiry by turning to biblical religion, was one and the same reason. Nor was there,
in that very reason, any ground for preferring the one alternative to the other . . . Both the Bible
and Socratic philosophy provided a firm basis for moral choices, and the moral choices they
endorsed were substantially the same. Whether the ultimate reason for choosing the moral virtues
was obedient love of the living God, or the goodness of the life of autonomous reason, was less
important than their agreement upon the moral order which must inform the life of decent
society.79

79Harry Jaffa, “Strauss at One Hundred,” Leo Strauss, the Straussians, and the American
Lanham, 1999), p. 45.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

Our investigation has come a long way, only to return to the question with which it began: Was Socrates a good citizen? For more than a few reasons and in more than one instance we were forced to answer in a way different from so many contemporary scholars: no, Socrates was not a good citizen. If it has done anything, our approach has shown that an honest appraisal of Socrates’ civic virtue must begin not with Socrates himself, so to speak, but instead with the ancient city – with the locus of civic virtue. The practice of politics before and during Socrates’ time did not assume systematic, rational speculation as an integral part of its existence. Quite the opposite, philosophy emerges at a point in history, and when it does, it shows itself to be new and without precedent. The setting for the emergence of philosophy is then a non-philosophical setting, one that is whole without the insights brought on by sustained reflection. This is what we meant when we noted that the city is self-sufficient; the city as city grows out of the need men have for one another, both in an erotic and spirited way. The character of the ancient city is thus closed, for with its self-sufficiency comes a likeness of mind and sameness of purpose that blend men together into a functioning and fruitful whole. Much could be said of the ancient city’s character; indeed, much remains to be done if the emergence of philosophy is to be understood properly. But such was not our task. It sufficed that we began with comedy, for comedy assumed the ancient city in a way that allowed us a glimpse of the city’s nature. And with that glimpse also came the context of philosophy’s birth.
Socrates’ way of philosophizing was not the only or even the first form of philosophizing. Instead, it was an attempt to justify the philosophical way of life by subjecting to unyielding scrutiny the opinions of citizens in which the alternatives to philosophy as a way of life might be found. The precariousness of philosophy is the condition of its political existence, and nowhere was that tension felt more acutely than by those who first took it up as a way of life. Socrates really was idiosyncratic, for his peculiar erotic passion for knowledge appeared not long after the emergence of philosophy, but long enough that philosophy felt the need to question its own existence. The philosophical way of life had to become an object of inquiry, which required justifying it over and above the alternatives open to man. Ancient philosophy is thus political not only because it must justify itself against the alternatives that become manifest only in the authoritative opinions about the common good, but also because access to those opinions is circumscribed by a political context characteristic of the ancient city.

This setting within which Socratic philosophizing emerged is now almost lost to us in the modern world, a fact surely indicated by our need of a comic to remind us of its importance. Those who would make Socrates a model for citizenship have forgotten the unique and necessary character of the ancient city, and that to their detriment. Thus we know we have missed the mark when we hear those advocates of Socratic citizenship say things like the following:

In the relatively few free republics and democracies that arose during the same period, citizens have generally preferred the verities of God and country over a more skeptical or critical form of membership. Today, as in the past, the phrase ‘good citizen’ has a fundamentally anti-Socratic resonance. It brings to mind people who fully engage the obligations of membership, as defined by the community or institution they happen to find themselves a part of. ‘Good citizens’ channel their energy into loyal service to their company, church, schools, and political
associations. That the ends pursued and means employed by these groups and organizations are at times morally questionable is something that rarely, if ever, engages their attention. For the most part, ‘good citizens’ fulfill their obligations loyally and without criticism. ‘Conscientiousness’ means attentiveness to duty and nothing more. From a Socratic point of view, this is—and will always be—a travesty. It is especially so with respect to political membership, since the injustices committed by the state—any state—have the force of policy or law and are thereby vested with a bogus legitimacy.\footnote{Dana Villa, \textit{Socratic Citizenship} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p 299.}

We must not be lulled into forgetting that philosophy is not necessary to political life; a way of life dedicated to knowing the truth of things is not and can never be the same as the life of a citizen. Socrates was not a good citizen of Athens, not because he was malevolent or morally corrupt, but because he simply did not love his family or city in the ways in which citizens love their own. And for this reason a model of citizenship based on Socrates’ eros is no model at all, for it culminates not in critical detachment or moral honesty, but in indifference and the death of civic spirit. Those who advocate Socratic citizenship would have us believe that patriotism truly is the virtue of the vicious, but that is only because they have mistaken the forest for the trees.

But maybe we are being too harsh in our analysis. After all, Socrates is meant to be a model of citizenship today, not for his fellow citizens, but for us. We certainly do not live in the ancient city, and hence do not live in settings whose horizons are as exclusive as were those that circumscribed ancient life. No, we live in grand societies where the love of one’s own is not as demanding and harsh as it once was. The ancient city has been replaced by the cosmopolitan liberal democracy, where all are welcome and none made to feel excluded. In fact, the modern virtue is not patriotism; instead it is tolerance, a political virtue the origins of which were found
in the attempts to mitigate the love of one’s own with a view to political stability and tranquility. The ancient city is no more, and there is no return possible. Maybe our advocates of Socratic citizenship got their history wrong, but their advocacy correct. Maybe we have much to learn from Socrates’ eros.

One could even say that the advocates of Socratic citizenship are correct in so far as they champion a version of citizenship prefigured in the very work that makes Socrates available to us. Plato’s art of writing was seen to be reformative, an attempt to bridge the chasm between thought and practice to the benefit of practice and as an aspect of thinking. Maybe Socrates is a model for us today precisely because the changes Plato’s writings sought to effect have had the intended consequences; we identify with Socrates more today than did his fellow citizens because of the influence Plato and his divine art have had on our ways of thinking. Is this not what Plato intended? Are the advocates of Socratic citizenship not championing that way of life they have learned to love because of Plato’s influence? Is Socrates not the quintessential liberal democrat?

There may be something to this, but before jumping off into idle speculation, let us instead address the matter in a more direct and fruitful manner. If Plato’s art has really changed the practice of politics, then the historical Socrates should not only serve as a better model of citizenship today, but should also fit into Plato’s own divine project seamlessly, at home in this best of occasions. Let us then ask: Would Socrates have been a good citizen in the *Laws*? Now this question is not meant to provoke a systematic answer, though in every respect it deserves
one. Instead, we seek only the answer that should present itself in light of all we have seen. And at first glance, the answer to the question seems to be yes; the city of the *Laws* is more directly related to a virtue the systematic unity of which might appeal to the likes of Socrates. The nature of eros surely has been educated such that the tendency of eros toward beautiful bodies has been redirected toward beauties that better reflect the philosophical good. The role the love of one’s own plays in human life has been subtly altered, diminishing its tendency toward the body ever so slightly in lieu of more abstract beauties. Men still love their family and city, but now those things have been tied together within a systematic whole that mitigates conflicts between what men want and what they must do. Virtue becomes the overt paradigm of the new city such that the citizens need not be reminded by a heroic philosopher to tend first to their own souls.

And, indeed, is Socrates the tragic hero not the first citizen of the *Laws* precisely because his divine mission is now intelligible within the divine framework of the city’s gods? The city’s myths are no longer contradictory; quite the opposite, the city’s virtue is made possible because the gods are of a single voice with regard to virtue, a voice that is echoed in the city’s laws. Socrates need be a hero no longer, for in the new city he can be at home in a setting that does not demand one thing of the citizens while reverencing gods who do another. The virtue of the citizen is the virtue of the city is the virtue of the gods; men, maybe even Socrates, may love their own because it is good and noble. Socrates need possess no anger, for indignation is
countenanced by laws for those who would break the divine laws, laws that reflect the proper order of things. The gods are vengeful, if only because the transgressions committed against their justice is untenably evil; voluntary injustice can only be committed by those who do not deserve to live in the city of the *Laws*.

Socrates’ attempt to justify his way of life against the greatest alternatives made available at the political level finds no alternatives in the *Laws*. The divine will whose mysteriousness posed a threat to the historical Socrates’ quest for wisdom is no longer an alternative to that quest in the new city of virtue. The will of the gods is no longer mediated through the voices of the poets, but instead through the cosmos’ almost wholly intelligible nature. And does the *Laws* not even leave room for Socrates at the top, enshrining a seat for him among the would-be rulers of the city on the Nocturnal Council? The best citizen also becomes the best ruler, suggesting that there is room for the guidance of wisdom in the best city, especially with regard to the knowledge and protection of the gods and the soul:

> It is strange yet hardly accidental that in this concluding section, the work suddenly and for the last time is broken up into dialogue after so many books of uninterrupted legislation. The necessity for the institution of this council can be demonstrated only in conversation. For ‘it is no easy matter to discover nor can we find out from others’ what subjects are to be studied by the members of the council. And ‘it would be futile to write down regulations’ (en grammasin, 968D) as to when and how long subjects are to be studied. We cannot fail to observe that even after so many books on legislation, Plato in the end is still cognizant of the fact that there is something unsatisfactory about the rigidity of the written word. ²

In creating a city based on wisdom, and then leaving it open in the end to the rule of the wise, Plato makes room for philosophy in politics, and hence, reconciles Socrates to the city. Socrates’ way of life becomes salutary with the advent of philosophical statesmanship, so much so in fact that Socrates may in fact be the new model of citizenship.

But, as we have done so many times now, we must not be so quick to believe there is reconciliation when in fact there may be only rhetoric. There are two problems with what we have just seen, problems that must be explored if our final word on Socratic citizenship today is to be complete. First, one must never forget that making a space within politics for Socrates is not the same as making Socrates into a citizen. The city of Plato’s *Laws*, as well as liberal democracy today, may in fact be a better ‘home’ for Socrates. This change in the practice and character of political life, however, does not bring with it a necessary change in Socrates. In a way, this is what the advocates of Socratic citizenship miss: making the character of political life reflect more or less the character of Socrates does not then makes Socrates political. Political life may be made Socratic to some degree, but Socrates cannot be made into a full citizen. And this because of what we have seen, and what we must consider now in its full gravity – Socrates was apolitical, and the answer to this problem is not found within the regime itself. Socrates’ idiosyncratic eros cannot be duplicated in the great mass of citizens. Nor would that be desirable; a mass of Socrates’s is hardly a city, although Socrates’ way of life itself presupposed the city. Socrates was simply not interested in being a citizen; his inquiries and cross-examination were
done primarily if not exclusively for his own benefit, i.e., in the pursuit of his own education. We will not go so far as to say Socrates was parasitic, for there is something most assuredly noble about his way of life, but we will say that his indifference is at best only marginally tolerable to political life. Political life is the locus of decision making, the nexus of action; it is not primarily the field of inquiry or the subject of thought. The latter may be brought to bear on the former, but never in such a way as to mistake one for the other.

Socrates’ civic life was in the service of his philosophical life. It provided him the occasion whereby he could know himself better through confrontations with those who did not philosophize and had no apparent need of philosophy. There are many problems associated with political life, not the least of which is its susceptibility to foolish decisions, but one cannot go from this fact to the position that good citizens must of necessity be self-reflective in a Socratic sense. Political life does not admit of that level of inquiry, and demanding of it that no injustice be done does not make politics better. Philosophizing and philosophers are essentially private beings, and any attempt to fully harmonize their good with the good of non-philosophers will invariably destroy the integrity of one if not both. It suffices to point out that a hero, from the point of view of political life, is one whose sacrifice for the city or citizen is made with complete disregard to his own good, with no notion of harm or benefit. In contrast, Socrates’ heroic stance is done with complete regard for his good and in full knowledge of what may come of it.
The second problem with appropriating Socrates as model for citizenship is that we may have confused what is accidental with what is essential, and hence, overlooked the real citizen. Is it not Plato who is the true model of citizenship? Is his eros not complete eros, that which is capable of both knowing and acting, thought and practice? Is his writing not the necessary antidote to Socrates’, such that he alone is able to return to the polis as citizen-philosopher? But even to this noble impulse we must demur, if only because we resist the temptation to make greatness into the banal. Plato was not a citizen as such, but a teacher of citizens – nay, a teacher of the teachers of citizens. This art that speaks through time and space has as its audience both philosophers and would-be legislators, and this, in the end, because it is a new form of poetry. By divine we meant just that; Plato’s art stands above the city as that of a revelation, if not as the prolegomena to all future revelations. But it is in the very fact of his poetry that we cannot use Plato as a model for citizenship, nor Socrates, for whom the eternal character serves as a reminder of the real man’s inadequacies. Neither man, historical or literary, can be models of citizenship, although in their distance from the city they may nevertheless teach us something very important about citizenship, something that may have been forgotten and stands in need of a new defense.

In a way in which Socrates never could, Plato could at least play angry, which is to say, he could marshal spiritedness in support of the city by offering the proper occasions in which divine retribution would punish the injustices of man. Aristophanes and Socrates were both
comic in a sense; neither could create that which they mock. For that reason, both were
dependent on something more profound, something in the light of which who and what they were
became possible and intelligible. Plato superseded both of his teachers because he was capable of
creating the horizons necessary for both comedy and philosophy. Yet Plato is not for that
reason merely a storyteller — for it to be becoming of a philosopher to have written, those
writings must create effective horizons, horizons that offer a new approach to the good and the
noble. If we are to take seriously the proposition that Plato’s writings are evidence of an ability
to lead human beings through the telling of new stories about the gods, we are compelled to say
that his divine art points out, albeit indirectly, what is essential to political life from the
perspective of ancient philosophy.

On the one hand, as the locus of human life, the city is inextricably tied to the love of
one’s own. Primarily this means the family, which suggests that no matter how simplistic,
anachronistic, oppressive, or even unfulfilling it is, the family is the necessary condition of any
city, and thus, any regime. No healthy polity can exist without healthy families, for despite
whatever one may say negative about the family, there is simply no alternative to this most
ancient of traditions. And neither can the city be indifferent to the character of the family; the
city needs that there be families if only because it needs that there be citizens. Fertility is an
important aspect of eros, and in its own interest, if not in man’s erotic interests simply, the city
can not help but recognize that the family is the locus of human reproduction. Even modern man,
for whom the advances of technology have relieved from the experiences of eros the burden of child-bearing and rearing, has no better home for his erotic nature than that of the family. Alienation is the result of eros that has no home, not the goal of a new erotic citizenship.

On the other hand, just as the city needs the family, so too does it need its gods if it is to be whole. We have seen since the beginning that the city stood on a foundation the comprehensiveness of which adds the necessary support to justice and the laws. The city needs that there be gods, if only because men’s eros needs parameters that are both educative and harsh. The gods must provide models of conduct as well as retribution for injustice. Men must be taught to desire what they should in the proper manner, and in turn be given assurance that his well-formed preferences have divine support and protection. In other words, the beautiful gods must teach human eros to love in moderation, which is but the first step toward teaching citizens moral virtue. Without this divine support, law is nothing but human contrivance, at best a lowly attempt to ensure simple order and stability. But political life is much more than commodious living; the sphere of the political is that level at which the highest agreement about the common good is made manifest. One would do well to remember that the city of the Laws differs most profoundly with regard to the respect accorded the divine things, respect embodied in the most important offices of the regime. It is no surprise that many scholars looking for an alternative conception of citizenship turned to that man who made the question of virtue his life’s calling. It is also no surprise that the foundations for the virtue they seek are found in the very reason for
which they were compelled to go searching in the beginning. Even though the comparison is often made, men are more likely, if not more able, to follow the lead set by Christ rather than that of Socrates.

These reservations, as well as many others that have been voiced in the context of this examination, have led us to this most precarious of positions. Our reservations about Socratic citizenship cannot be clearer: Socrates cannot be a model for citizenship. Neither can Plato, nor ancient philosophy in general. Without intending any drama of our own, we must say that ancient philosophy as a whole offers us no real alternative at all. We can neither return to the ancient city, nor remake the modern world on an ancient footing. Ancient philosophy assumed the existence of the traditional homes of eros in a way inappropriate to modern life. If Socrates were alive today, his questioning would be directed toward what we hold most dear. One can almost hear him ask how liberal democracy believes it can sustain itself without those things most necessary for the inculcation of virtue. No doubt Socrates would be the moral gadfly championed by so many scholars, but his pesky questioning would undoubtedly take aim at our awkward indifference toward the necessary conditions of virtue, which is a most un-liberal approach indeed.

Socrates would invariably make us look at ourselves and question why we believe in freedom for those who should have no voice in ruling, why we think the regime should tolerate that which does not promote virtue, and how we can in good faith have as a higher priority
equality than God and the family. And most importantly, Socrates would wonder how we could
even speak the language of virtue, no matter how diminished or diluted, without being able to
speak of the soul itself. The mysteriousness of the whole of which Socrates considered himself a
part is an ever diminishing aspect of political life in modern democracies. For Socrates as well as
Plato, the soul was an irreducible phenomenon, one that gave man a special place in the cosmos
but which nevertheless also kept him humble. Yet one rarely speaks of the soul today in public
discourse, and rarer still are those who will openly advocate the limits of man’s knowledge and
the mysteriousness of nature. To this Socrates would demand an account of personal action and
a justification for the pursuit of knowledge. Socrates’ indifference cuts both ways, and it would
hurt us no less than it hurt Athens. Those who advocate Socratic citizenship believe him to be
the perfect modern democrat, when, in reality, his passion would be directed toward that which
they themselves hold most dear.

It is in this cruelest of ironies, however, that we see finally the virtue of the ancients.
Socrates may not be a model of citizenship, but through the immortal sketch drawn by the divine
artist, he can force us to look at ourselves again much as he once did and made others do. Plato’s
work as a whole not only shows us the way to Socratic self-knowledge, but also what is at stake
in terms of the conflict between philosophy and politics, morality, and even religion. Out of this
conflict emerges what Plato and maybe even Socrates thought to be essential to both
philosophical and political life. It may not be true that Plato was correct about this tension;
maybe the love of one’s own can be moderated without recourse to what was always available to
man. Maybe the education of human eros involves manipulating the nature of the family and city
in such ways as to retain their outward form while nonetheless reconstituting their core
substance. Maybe the modern world takes its bearings not from the influence of Plato’s divine
art inasmuch as the teachings of others who made the elevation of man’s estate their priority.
What is true, however, is that Plato’s writings provide a comprehensive framework that serves as
a mirror of sorts, one that shows us from whence we came, and makes us rethink with honesty
and acuity where we are going. The virtue of the ancients lies in their brutal honesty, in their
ability to challenge what one loves and the reasons for that love with a clarity hitherto
unmatched. Plato may not teach us to be citizens, but he does show us how to approach the
question of citizenship, and with it, all the attending matters of importance. We find in the
dialogues a freshness of insight that can only have been present when philosophy was new, and
hence when the questions of its relevance were most earnestly felt. We can do no better than to
expect of a return to the ancients that our own opinions might be forced to become knowledge
given the requisite passion and discipline. But this of course was what education once meant,
and what Plato suggests in the end it must always be.
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Vita

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